

# ISAAC, IPHIGENEIA, IGNATIUS



## Martyrdom and Human Sacrifice

Monika  
Pesthy-Simon

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*Martyrdom and Human Sacrifice*

MONIKA PESTHY-SIMON



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# Abbreviations

|             |                                                                                                                                                                   |
|-------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <i>ANF</i>  | Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and Arthur Cleveland Coxe, eds. <i>The Ante-Nicene Fathers</i> , 10 vols. Reprint edition. Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1994. |
| <i>CCSL</i> | <i>Corpus Christianorum</i> . Series latina. Turnhout.                                                                                                            |
| <i>CPG</i>  | <i>Clavis Patrum Graecorum</i> . Turnhout: Brepols.                                                                                                               |
| <i>CSCO</i> | <i>Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium</i> . Paris, later Louvain and Washington, then Leuven, 1903–.                                                     |
| <i>CSEL</i> | <i>Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum</i> . Wien.                                                                                                       |
| <i>DBS</i>  | <i>Dictionnaire de la Bible. Supplément</i> . Paris, 1928–.                                                                                                       |
| <i>DECA</i> | <i>Dictionnaire Encyclopédique du Christianisme Ancien</i> . 2 vols. Paris: Cerf, 1990.                                                                           |
| <i>DS</i>   | <i>Dictionnaire de Spiritualité</i> . Paris, later Chantilly, 1932–1995.                                                                                          |
| <i>GCS</i>  | <i>Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller</i> . Leipzig and Berlin.                                                                                         |
| <i>GNO</i>  | <i>Gregorii Nysseni Opera</i> . Leiden, 1960–1972.                                                                                                                |
| <i>LXX</i>  | The Septuagint.                                                                                                                                                   |
| <i>NRSV</i> | <i>The Holy Bible with Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books</i> . New Revised Standard Version. New York: American Bible Society, 1989.                              |
| <i>PG</i>   | J.-P. Migne. <i>Patrologia. Series Graeca</i> (161 volumes). Paris, 1857–1868.                                                                                    |
| <i>PGL</i>  | G. W. H. Lampe. <i>A Patristic Greek Lexicon</i> . Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968.                                                                                 |
| <i>PL</i>   | J.-P. Migne, <i>Patrologia. Series Latina</i> (221 volumes). Paris, 1844–64.                                                                                      |

- RAC* *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum*. Stuttgart, 1950–.
- RGG*<sup>4</sup> *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*. 4<sup>th</sup> edition. Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1998–2007.
- RPP* *Religion Past & Present. Encyclopedia of Theology and Religion*. 10 vols. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2007–2011.
- SC* *Sources Chrétiennes*. Paris: Cerf, 1943–.
- TRE* *Theologische Realenzyklopädie*. Berlin and New York: De Gruyter, 1976–2004.
- ThWAT* *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Alten Testament*. Stuttgart, 1973–2015.
- ThWNT* *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament*. Stuttgart, 1933–1979.

# Introduction

Martyrdom is one of the most controversial and incomprehensible phenomena of early Christianity. In the Roman Empire which, as we know, was quite tolerant in religious matters a great number of people (though much less than suggested by ancient sources) succeeded in dying for their religious convictions. Our feelings about this can be very different: we may admire the unbending courage and heroism of the martyrs or be irritated by their stubbornness, or even feel disgusted at the fanaticism with which they strove for death. But whatever our feelings may be, we must admit that a very strong motivation is needed to accept voluntarily or even seek death (and, in the majority of cases, a very painful death at that). Martyrs sacrifice themselves to God, as it is often stated in their acts. And even if the language used by the martyrologists is often metaphorical (e.g. “crown of different colours and flowers,” *Acts of the Martyrs of Lyons* 1.36; “to become a libation for God” [σπονδισθῆναι θεῷ], Ignatius, *Letter to the Romans* 2.2) the sacrifices are real and those who die in this way are human beings. The present work proposes to investigate martyrdom as a (voluntary) human sacrifice.

It goes without saying that the origins of Christian martyrdom have been thoroughly studied and its connections established with Jewish martyrology, with the Greek and Roman tradition of the “noble death” and of course with Jesus’ redeeming death.<sup>1</sup> The most important passages in early

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<sup>1</sup> For a brief overview of recent martyrological research see e. g. Middleton, *Radical Martyrdom and Cosmic Conflict in Early Christianity*, 3–5 (with bibliographical references in the notes).

Christian writings describing martyrdom as a sacrifice have also been collected and analyzed, although they are mainly considered as having used “sacrificial metaphors.” Candida Moss has written that “among scholars of Christianity the predominant model for explaining the function and purpose of the martyr’s death is one of sacrifice,”<sup>2</sup> which is probably true, but scholars mostly connect martyrdom with earlier Jewish and pagan ritual (non-human) sacrifices and, first and foremost, with the sacrifice of Christ. The relations of martyrdom to earlier human sacrifices have been left almost totally out of consideration; at most some remarks scattered here and there hint at it. This is all the more curious as in recent times a number of works have paid considerable attention to the sacrificial character of martyrdom, and though they clearly believe that what we are dealing with are human sacrifices no connection with earlier (mythical or real) ones is established.

Stroumsa in his book entitled *The End of Sacrifice* argues that the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, which led to the cessation of animal sacrifices in Judaism and the formation of a new kind of religiosity, subsequently marked a turning point in the sacrificial practice of the Roman Empire. In this process, however, Christianity marks “a conservative return to Israel’s sacrificial system,” because it defines “itself precisely as a religion concentrated on sacrifice even if it was a reinterpreted sacrifice.”<sup>3</sup> In the first Christian centuries, the *imitatio Christi* means first of all “the will to go up to martyrdom in order to repeat in some way the sacrifice of the Son of God, a sacrifice that had also been, in theory, the last of human sacrifices<sup>4</sup>.... The martyrs and virgins no longer bring the sacrifice—they *are* the sacrifice.<sup>5</sup> In effect, Christianity offers to every man and woman the possibility of becoming the sacrifice.”<sup>6</sup> Stroumsa comes to the conclusion: “Sacrifices may well have ceased at the Temple of Jerusalem, and three centuries later in all temples of the empire, but the idea of sacrifice (and with it violence) was manifestly far from dying.”<sup>7</sup> Thus Stroumsa connects martyrdom with the earlier sacrificial practice of the Temple and with the (human) sacrifice of Christ,

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<sup>2</sup> Moss, *The Other Christs*, 83.

<sup>3</sup> Stroumsa, *The End of Sacrifice*, 72.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>5</sup> He bases this observation on Elsner’s analysis of several early Christian mosaics found in Rome, cf. Stroumsa, *The End of Sacrifice*, 76, n. 56.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

but not with earlier human sacrifices. He realizes the similarity between sacrifice and martyrdom and remarks that Christians' "horror of human sacrifice went hand in hand with an acceptance of martyrdom, sometimes even with an attraction toward it,"<sup>8</sup> but does not go any further.

Halbertal in his ingenious book *On Sacrifice* depicts in a clear-cut and elegant way how the idea "to sacrifice to" (which constituted the base of all religious practice) became transformed into the idea "to sacrifice for" (which survives under different—not necessarily religious—forms in modern societies). Between the two "the understanding of martyrdom itself as an actual offering of the self to God served as a crucial link."<sup>9</sup> Halbertal emphasizes more than once that martyrdom is an *actual* offering which on the one hand imitates the self-offering of Christ, but on the other hand substitutes for the Old Testament animal sacrifices. "This unique transformation of the meaning of self-sacrifice in martyrdom into an actual offering is a way of depicting the Christian martyrs not only as witnessing the truth of their belief in Christ but also as emulating him as an offering to God, while their self-sacrifice has the same purifying and atoning impact as his."<sup>10</sup> He even claims (rightly or not): "Since animal sacrifice was considered ... as a substitute for the giving of the self, martyrdom was a substitute that aimed at short-circuiting that kind of substitution by directly offering the self."<sup>11</sup> This leads us to the sequence: human sacrifice → animal sacrifice → martyrdom; but Halbertal does not pursue this line of thought further.

The viewpoint of Heyman (in *The Power of Sacrifice*) is especially interesting. He devotes a whole chapter to this topic ("The Sacrifice of the Martyr"),<sup>12</sup> his central idea being that the martyrs, by refusing to sacrifice to the "idols" and the emperor, became sacrifices themselves at God's command.<sup>13</sup> Nonetheless he stops short of stating that martyrs *are* human sacrifices and calls martyrdom a "human *form* of sacrifice" (italics mine).<sup>14</sup> He speaks of the "sacrificial metaphors" used by Ignatius (as e.g. *thusia* in *Letter to the Romans* 4.2) and the only example from classical literature quoted

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>9</sup> Halbertal, *On Sacrifice*, 59.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Heyman, *The Power of Sacrifice*, 161–218.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. e.g. *ibid.*, 164, 206, 232.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 65.

by him as relevant for the understanding of martyrdom is Alcestis as represented by Euripides.<sup>15</sup>

Bowersock denies the Jewish roots of Christian martyrology—"in my view generations of scholars have labored abortively to trace literary motifs that could be paralleled in other texts such as the Old Testament (Daniel, in particular) and the second and fourth books of Maccabees"<sup>16</sup>—and argues that "the concept of martyrdom was constructed by the Christians in the hundred years or so between about 50 and 150, and the word adapted in the second half of that period."<sup>17</sup> According to him the relevant texts of the books of the Maccabees are later; they did not influence early Christian martyrological texts, but rather the reverse. He interprets martyrdom within the framework of Graeco-Roman urban life and emphasizes that "early martyrdom absolutely presupposed self-sacrifice within some kind of a community."<sup>18</sup> Though he calls the martyr's death "self-sacrifice," he realizes that the initiative for it comes ultimately from God. It would have taken only one more step to ask: In the end, who offers whom to whom?

Against Bowersock, Boyarin argues for an interaction between Rabbinic and Christian martyrology.<sup>19</sup>

Bergmann (*In the Shadow of Moloch*) states unequivocally that the practice of human sacrifice survived under the form of martyrdom: "Around the time of the Babylonian exile (585 B. C.) all traces of the sacrifice of children had been successfully eliminated from the Jewish religion. However, the triumph was short-lived. The very same need for human sacrifice returned during the Maccabean revolt (135 B. C. [sic!]) in the form of the cultural ideal of the martyr who sacrifices himself or herself to the deity, a practice that continues today. The deity that had given up human sacrifices was now seen as delighting in the self-chosen death of the martyrs. Yhwh, who loves his chosen people, loves his martyrs most of all."<sup>20</sup>

Bergmann is interested first and foremost in the psychological impact of child sacrifice on Western religion and deals with martyrdom only tangen-

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 174, n. 34. Alcestis is the only case in Euripides of voluntary sacrifice which has nothing to do with martyrdom.

<sup>16</sup> Bowersock, *Martyrdom and Rome*, 26.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>19</sup> Boyarin, *Dying for God*.

<sup>20</sup> Bergmann, *In the Shadow of Moloch*, 4.



tially. He concentrates on the sacrifice of Christ, which he sees as a survival of Old Testament first-born sacrifices. His treatment of martyrdom is therefore over-simplified and many important motifs are left out of consideration. Nonetheless, his statements are often very perspicacious and I will time and again make reference to them.

Several other works contributed important material for certain parts of my topic; I shall mention them at their proper place. In general, it can be remarked that almost every author, with very few exceptions, who investigates the origins of martyrdom is concerned either with the Jewish or with the classical tradition and tries to derive martyrdom from the one or the other, instead of considering the two as intermingling with one another, as they surely must have.

In this study I shall argue that martyrs are actual and not “metaphorical” sacrifices and, consequently human sacrifices, since those who die in this way are human beings. Therefore, I shall try to interpret the sacrificial character of martyrdom on the basis of its relation to ancient (mythical or real) human sacrifices. My argumentation will be based on the idea that human sacrifices, which originally were addressed to the divinities of nature, being connected subsequently to the paradigm “to die for” were transformed into voluntary sacrifices and survived under this form in Jewish and Christian martyrology. The two emblematic figures of this process of transformation are Isaac and Iphigeneia: the first constitutes a link between human sacrifice and Jewish martyrology, the sacrifice of Christ and, in a lesser measure, Christian martyrology; the second between human sacrifice and Christian martyrology.

The relations of martyrdom to earlier Jewish and Greco-Roman ritual (non-human) sacrifices have been sufficiently established, so we shall not dwell on them. We shall rather pay attention to certain interesting aspects of the (rather complex) relations between earlier animal sacrifices, ancient human sacrifices and martyrdom.<sup>21</sup>

I am of course aware that martyrdom as sacrifice is only one of the possible (ancient and modern) interpretations of the phenomenon. Candida Moss argues that martyrdom can also be (and indeed was) interpreted as a “Cosmic Battle” and as a “model for others,” and that these are equally or perhaps

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<sup>21</sup> The problem has been mentioned above in connection with the ideas of Halbertal and Stroumsa.

even more important for the understanding of this phenomenon. This is completely true, and probably other interpretations/models/paradigms (whatever we choose to call them) could be put forward in order to better understand martyrdom. All these models concern some special aspect of martyrdom and therefore do not exclude one another; as Moss also notes: "In practice the communities responsible for the martyrdom accounts constructed the death of the martyrs using more than one model."<sup>22</sup> Indeed, the same martyr could be depicted as triumphing over Satan while sacrificing himself to God, and by doing so he could, on the one hand, serve as a model for others, and on the other, assure for himself a very high post mortem place in heaven, and perhaps even "share the status of Christ."<sup>23</sup> As stated before, we are interested in the sacrificial model, first and foremost in its connections with human sacrifices; but this does not mean that I wish to call in question the *raison d'être* of other paradigms, nor is it my aim to decide which of them is the most important. At the end of the study we shall see if on the basis of our investigations we can say anything concerning these models and their relations to each other. As practically all martyrs were meant as examples for others, what is most of interest are the relations of the paradigms "martyrdom as sacrifice" and "martyrdom as cosmic battle."

Before embarking on our task I must make some remarks concerning the most important notions which I shall use and explain the methods and objectives of the present work.

First of all, it must be stated that I shall not even try to give an exact definition either of 'sacrifice' or of 'martyrdom,' both of these notions being so controversial that any attempt would involve us too deeply (and unnecessarily) in problems concerning their interpretation.

The term "human sacrifice" is often applied to phenomena which in the strict sense of the word do not belong to this category, for instance vengeance, ritual executions or scapegoat killings.<sup>24</sup> Futrell's definition, "... killing with spiritual or religious motivation, usually accompanied by ritual and performed in a sacred place,"<sup>25</sup> is somewhat vague because it fits other kinds of ritual killing as well. We shall consider only those cases where the sacri-

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<sup>22</sup> Moss, *The Other Christs*, 76.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 164.

<sup>24</sup> Bremmer, "Sacrificing a Child in Ancient Greece," 23.

<sup>25</sup> Futrell, *Blood in the Arena*, 170.

ficial element is clear, that is, where an innocent human being is offered to the divinity (or perhaps to the dead hero). Other cases of ritual killing will be mentioned only briefly and where necessary, and always taking care not to confuse the different notions.

Human sacrifices were practiced all over the world and mostly not in “primitive” but rather in more developed and well-organized societies.<sup>26</sup> Many kinds of human sacrifice are known.<sup>27</sup> Read, following Robertson Smith, Frazer and Mauss, enumerates nine basic purposes for which they were practiced: 1. to release souls for the service of the dead ancestors; 2. as a gift to the gods (in the hope of exchange or to propitiate them); 3. as a communion meal in which the power of life is assimilated and thus regenerated; 4. in expiation; 5. in atonement; 6. for the regeneration of earthly fertility, 7. or of immortality; 8. to transform human conditions; 9. to unify the divine and the mortal.<sup>28</sup> For Bremmer the following three categories or contexts are especially important: the aftermath of wars (sacrifice of prisoners); situations of extreme danger; and sacrifices in the construction of buildings.<sup>29</sup> According to Futrell, human sacrifices take place mostly “in ceremonies accompanying foundations, funerals, and as special victims in state cults.”<sup>30</sup>

Our investigations will not cover human sacrifice in general. As we are interested only in those cases which could serve as antecedents to Christian martyrdom we shall limit ourselves to human sacrifices in ancient Israel, Greece, Rome and Carthage, and we shall focus our attention mostly on sacrifices offered to avert some extreme danger and/or to appease an offended divinity or simply as a gift to the divinity.

As so-called “voluntary sacrifices” will be a central concern for us, we must state right at the beginning that a human sacrifice remains a human

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Bremmer, ed., *The Strange Way of Human Sacrifice*, 2–3; cf. Futrell, *Blood in the Arena*, 170.

<sup>27</sup> For a thorough overview of human sacrifice among different nations see e.g. the article “Human Sacrifice,” in *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, ed. James Hastings, 6: 840–67; Bremmer, ed., *The Strange Way of Human Sacrifice*; Futrell, *Blood in the Arena*, 169–210 (Futrell treats only those cases relevant for her topic); Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*.

<sup>28</sup> Read, “Human Sacrifice: An Overview,” 516.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Bremmer, ed., *The Strange World of Human Sacrifice*, 6.

<sup>30</sup> Futrell, *Blood in the Arena*, 170. Futrell uses the word ‘foundation’ in a very wide sense, including the beginning of important new undertakings and situations of danger in which the foundations of the state are menaced.

sacrifice whether the victim agrees to it or not.<sup>31</sup> The “voluntariness” serves only to diminish the responsibility and the guilt of the sacrificers and of the divinity accepting or even requiring the sacrifice. This phenomenon was termed by Karl Meuli a “comedy of innocence.”<sup>32</sup> The term “voluntary” itself is quite problematic and should be used with caution as it can mean everything from accepting the inescapable up to suicide.<sup>33</sup>

There is however one point which deserves attention and which, as far as I know, has not been noted before: by becoming “voluntary” the sacrifice tends to leave the domain of cult. Human sacrifice in general is carried out under strictly regulated cultic circumstances: the place, the way of killing, and the person of the sacrificer must all remain within the circle of “holiness.” But the moment the victim begins to play an active part in the events or, to use the categories of Halbertal, when “to sacrifice to” becomes “to sacrifice for,” this will not necessarily be the case anymore, as we shall see on several examples. In the course of our work we shall examine this change and its consequences.

‘Voluntary sacrifice’ and ‘self-sacrifice’ are not synonymous. Voluntariness can also mean, as we have just pointed out, the courageous acceptance of one’s doom, while self-sacrifice supposes that someone gives himself up freely and without exterior constraint. Self-sacrifice is not necessarily a religious act: ancient heroes died for their homeland, philosophers for their convictions, Alcestis for her husband, but none of them was a human sacrifice. In the case of the martyr, however, as Halbertal has perceptively noted, “sacrifice to” and “sacrifice for” coincide: the martyr sacrifices himself *for* God and at the same time *to* God.<sup>34</sup> In the course of this study we shall try to elucidate how these aspects which apparently exclude one another can be present at one and the same time in martyrdom. And we will return once more to the question: If martyrdom is considered as a sacrifice, by whom is the sacrifice offered? By the martyr himself, by the executioner or by God?

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<sup>31</sup> Cf. Versnel, “Self-sacrifice, Compensation and the Anonymous Gods,” 147–48. Versnel likewise arrives at the conclusion that between “normal” human sacrifice and self-sacrifice no rigorous distinction can be made.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Bremmer, ed., *The Strange World of Human Sacrifice*, 4, n. 20.

<sup>33</sup> See Grig, *Making Martyrs in Late Antiquity*, 19–20 about how meaningless the term “voluntary” is in Christian martyrology.

<sup>34</sup> Halbertal, *On Sacrifice*, 59–60.

In our treatment of sacrifice we shall follow the guidelines established by Bremmer: "The ideal analysis should always pay attention to the question of who sacrifices what to whom, where, when, why and with what kind of rhetoric."<sup>35</sup> As we shall see, the answer to these questions is not always easy, especially when we have to do with self-sacrifice, or the sacrificial interpretation of Jesus' death.

I propose to challenge the general opinion according to which the acceptance or rejection of human sacrifice constitutes the line of demarcation between the barbarians and the civilized world, and/or between the dark old times and the enlightened present.<sup>36</sup> I shall try to demonstrate that all the peoples we are interested in in the present instance, in other words, the ancient Israelites, the Greeks, the Romans and the Jews up to the first Christian centuries share a very ambiguous and hypocritical attitude toward human sacrifice: while in theory they condemn it as barbarian and belonging to bygone times, in concrete cases they accept, admire and even (under special circumstances) practice it. Christianity is born in this environment and becomes the inheritor of this attitude, which survives in Christian authors in an even more sharpened form.

As for martyrdom, it has been pointed out recently by several authors that there is no unequivocal definition which would be valid for all the phenomena considered (at least by some groups) as martyrdom.<sup>37</sup> Middleton is probably right when, after having reviewed several definitions and indicated their short-comings, he arrives to the conclusion: "Martyrs are not defined; martyrs are made."<sup>38</sup> So I shall not raise the question whether Socrates was a martyr or not, or whether or not we can speak of pagan martyrs, because the answer depends on the definition we give of martyrdom.

<sup>35</sup> Bremmer, ed., *The Strange Word of Human Sacrifice*, 2.

<sup>36</sup> E.g. Stroumsa, *The End of Sacrifice*, 73; Lanzillotta, "The early Christians and human sacrifice," in *The Strange Way of Human Sacrifice*, ed. Bremmer, 81.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Wischmeyer, "Martyr II. The Early Church," in *RPP* 8, 100. Christen, "Martyrium III/2: Systematisch-theologisch," in *TRE* 22, 212: "Es läßt sich keine einheitliche Deutung feststellen... [No unequivocal interpretation can be established]." For the problems concerning the definition of martyrdom see also Middleton, *Radical Martyrdom*, 8–15.

<sup>38</sup> Middleton, *Martyrdom: A Guide to the Perplexed*, 174.

The present study does not seek to treat martyrdom in general; we are interested only in early Jewish and Christian martyrology.<sup>39</sup> But even in this case it is not easy to define what exactly ‘martyrdom’ means. In order to demonstrate this it suffices to consult the article “martyr” in *RPP*. On page 100 we find: “Because the root μαρτυ/*martu* is so frequent, and covers such a wide semantic field in Greek, especially in legal texts ..., in LXX and the Pseudepigrapha ..., and particularly in the NT, there has still not been a decisive discussion about precise derivation and meaning of the title of the martyr, the idea of Christian martyrdom, and the exact description of a theology of martyrdom ... The title of martyr in the clear sense of *death at the hands of an enemy state power* is found for the first time in MartPol [*Martyrdom of Polycarp*] (3<sup>rd</sup> quarter of the 2<sup>nd</sup> cent.)” (italics mine).<sup>40</sup> However, in another part of the same article written by another scholar we read the following statement: “The term *martyrium* (Greek μαρτύριον/*martúrion*) was coined in early Christianity, where it denotes a *self-sacrificial death in religious conflict* as a witness to faith” (italics mine).<sup>41</sup> Thus within the same article there is no agreement on a very important point: is a martyr necessarily executed by some inimical power, or may he, for example, kill himself and still be called a martyr (the expression “self-sacrificial death” can easily extend to suicide as well). The question was contested even in early Christianity, and Clement of Alexandria denied the name of martyr to those “who give themselves up to a futile death.”<sup>42</sup> Notwithstanding this, a very great number of Christian martyrs, venerated as such ever since, actually did give themselves up in this way. It seems that early Christianity in general had no difficulty in accepting suicidal forms of death as martyrdom (called by Middleton “radical martyrdom”<sup>43</sup>), and the condemnation of this practice began only later in opposition to the Donatists’ passionate desire for martyrdom.

In their characterization of martyrdom, Dodge and Tabor, instead of giving a definition, establish the following common elements on the basis of the accounts found in early Jewish writings about voluntary death accepted

<sup>39</sup> Throughout this book I shall use the expression ‘Jewish martyrology’ or ‘Jewish martyrs’ without entering into the discussion whether in these cases the expressions ‘martyrology,’ ‘martyr’ can be used in the strict sense of the word or not.

<sup>40</sup> Wischmeyer, “Martyr II. The Early Church,” 100.

<sup>41</sup> Beinhauer-Köhler, “Martyr I. History of Religion,” in *RPP* 8, 99.

<sup>42</sup> Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* IV.4.17.3; cf. Middleton, *Martyrdom*, 8.

<sup>43</sup> Middleton, *Radical Martyrdom*.

because of religious reasons: "First, they [these accounts] reflect situations of opposition and persecution. Second, the choice to die, which the individuals make, is viewed by the authors as necessary, noble and heroic. Third, these individuals are often eager to die; indeed, in several cases they end up directly *killing themselves*. Fourth, there is often the idea of vicarious benefit resulting from their suffering and death. And finally, the expectation of vindication and reward beyond death, more often than not, is a prime motivation for their choice of death."<sup>44</sup> For our purpose this description of early Christian and Jewish martyrology can be of use, but a fifth element (perhaps the most important) should be added to the list, namely that the martyr dies because of the conviction which he openly confesses. In the case of the Christian martyrs this means that they always die for Christ and declare their wish to do so. It has to be emphasized that the martyr actively defends his convictions, he is no passive victim of events and it depends on his deliberate choice whether he accepts death or saves himself through apostasy (or an act which means for him apostasy). As to the fourth element, the vicarious benefit of the martyr's death, we shall confirm if it is present in those martyr stories which we shall examine. As we have seen, situations of opposition and persecution are characteristic of martyrdom. But if the martyr dies under external constraint then how can his death be voluntary or how can it be considered as self-sacrifice? Yet, if there is no external constraint, then why does he sacrifice himself?

Concerning human sacrifice as well as martyrdom we must emphasize that we will always be dealing with literary texts as opposed to historical facts. It is secondary to our purpose whether human sacrifice was actually practiced in ancient Israel, Greece or Rome (in fact, the number of historically attested human sacrifices is very limited); what counts for us is the (very rich) literary or mythological tradition about it. Similarly, in the case of martyrdom, we have to keep in mind that we know the events from literary sources, and even the most sober "acts" in their present form are the results

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<sup>44</sup> Drodge and Tabor, *A Noble Death: Suicide and Martyrdom among Christians and Jews in Antiquity*, 75; quoted by Cormack, ed., *Sacrificing the Self: Perspectives on Martyrdom and Religion*, xii; and by Brettler who makes this definition (or rather description) the starting point of his study: "Is There Martyrdom in the Hebrew Bible?," in *Sacrificing the Self*, ed. Cormack, 4.

of some redaction, while the later passions and legends treat the historical facts (which sometimes are hardly known) very freely. This means that we never have access directly to the acts and ideas of the martyrs, but become acquainted with them only through the hagiographer's interpretation.

Chapters 1–4 will treat the antecedents of Christian martyrology: the first chapter will deal with human sacrifices in the Hebrew Bible; the second with human sacrifices, with heroic death for one's country and with the noble death of the philosopher in the Greek and Roman world as well as with cases of voluntary death and human sacrifice in Carthage; the third chapter examines how the idea of voluntary sacrifice emerges in early Judaism; the fourth is devoted to the interpretation of Jesus' death as a sacrifice. Chapters 5–7 treat the sacrificial character of martyrdom: in chapter 5 I present several martyrological texts which interpret martyrdom as a sacrifice; chapter 6 examines the models used by the hagiographers and challenges the central "topos" of martyrology, according to which the martyr imitates Christ; while in the concluding chapter I shall examine, mostly on the basis of the texts presented in chapter 5, but taking into consideration other martyrological texts and the statements of the Church fathers as well, the character and meaning of this sacrifice. I shall call attention to the equivocal attitude of early Christianity toward human sacrifice and the ideas about God and man which result from it. Why are people willing to sacrifice themselves to God and why does God require or at least accept such an appalling thing? What ideas did Christians (in ancient and not so ancient times) have about their God, the loving Father, to presume that he rejoices in these sacrifices? Finally, in the Epilogue, I shall permit myself some remarks about the later developments of martyrology and the survival of this sacrificial ideology.



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# Human Sacrifice in the Old Testament

Human sacrifice in ancient Israel is a much debated subject and we need not enter into detailed discussion. For our purpose it is not really important whether the human sacrifices mentioned in the Bible really took place or not, and if they did, whether only to “pagan” gods or also to YHWH. We are interested rather in the question what kinds of human sacrifices were known to the biblical authors, how they understood them and, first and foremost, why these sacrifices were offered. We shall now briefly survey from this point of view the human sacrifices found in the Hebrew Bible. In every case I give only a short summary based on standard works, without presenting all the problems connected with the topic. I will not, however, refrain from making my own remarks concerning the meaning of these sacrifices.

Other forms of ritual killing such as *herem* and vengeance are outside the scope of the present work and so we shall not treat them systematically. We shall, however, mention those cases which are possibly connected with the development of the ideas we are specifically interested in.

## OFFERING OF THE FIRSTBORN SON

“The firstborn of your sons you shall give to me,” orders YHWH in Ex 22.29.<sup>1</sup> Other passages, however, make it clear that this offering could be

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<sup>1</sup> Biblical passages (if not indicated otherwise) are quoted according to *The Holy Bible with Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books*, New Revised Standard Version

redeemed by an animal sacrifice (see Ex 34.19ff.; 13.2,12–13,15), and it is quite certain that there was never a time in Israel when all firstborn sons had to be sacrificed.<sup>2</sup>

### “...TO PASS THROUGH THE FIRE...”

The expression used for this sacrifice has given rise to speculation that it might simply represent a symbolical gesture, but modern scholarship generally accepts that it was a rite in which children were really sacrificed.<sup>3</sup> Deuteronomistic legislation describes it as an abominable habit of “the nations” (Deut 12.31: “...They would even burn their sons and their daughters in the fire to their gods”) and forbids it for the children of Israel (Deut 18.10: “No one shall be found among you who makes a son or daughter pass through the fire...”; similarly Lev 18.21: “You shall not give any of your offspring to pass them through the fire to Molech”; and Lev 20.2–5, under penalty of death<sup>4</sup>).

This prohibition presumably had its reasons: from the indignant outbursts of the prophets (Jer 19.4–5: “...they have filled this place with the blood of the innocent, and gone on building the high places of Baal to burn their children in the fire as burnt offerings to Baal, which I did not command or decree, nor did it enter my mind”; cf. Jer 32.35; Ezek 16.20) we can assume that in Israel children were indeed sacrificed as burnt offerings, *‘olāh* (עֹלָה).

The above-mentioned passages speak about “children,” “son and daughter,” “offspring” and not about firstborns, and the recipients of the offerings are foreign gods. We have, however, some passages which suggest that child sacrifices were offered to YHWH, too. According to Jer 7.31 the children of Judah “go on building the high place of Tophet, which is in the valley of the son of Hinnom, to burn their sons and their daughters in the fire—which I did not command, nor did it come into my mind.” It seems that the sin of

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(New York: American Bible Society, 1989), further on NRSV. The titles of biblical books are abbreviated according to NRSV.

<sup>2</sup> Frazer presumed that originally the firstborn sons were actually sacrificed at Passover, cf. Bergmann, *In the Shadow of Moloch*, 92.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. e.g. Noort, “Genesis 22: Human Sacrifice and Theology in the Hebrew Bible,” in *The Sacrifice of Isaac*, ed. Noort and Tigchelaar, 13.

<sup>4</sup> The *Holiness Code* (Lev 17–26) existed probably as a separate collection and is usually dated somewhat earlier than the Book of Deuteronomy, cf. Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son*, 44.

the children of Judah was not idolatry, but rather the misunderstanding of YHWH's commands.

All these passages prove that the burning of children was a well-known and wide-spread ritual in Israel, practiced not only by the neighboring nations but by the Israelites themselves during the 8<sup>th</sup>–7<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE, and we know that Ahaz “made his son pass through fire, according to the abominable practices of the nations” (2 Kings 16.3) and Manasseh did the same (2 Kings 21.6). King Josiah tried to put an end to this practice (2 Kings 23.10), probably without total success, as we find denunciations on it in later texts (Ezek 16.20–21) and even Trito-Isaiah knows about it: “Are you not children of transgression, the offspring of deceit—you that burn with lust among the oaks, under every green tree; you that slaughter your children in the valleys, under the clefts of the rocks?” (57.4–5). The dating of this verse is controversial,<sup>5</sup> but if we accept that Isa 57.1–13 is a real reflection of the life of the community before the reform of Esdras and Nehemiah, then it follows that child sacrifice was practiced even after the captivity, as late as the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE.

The passages mentioned hitherto are unanimous in condemning these “abominations,” but other passages seem to imply that YHWH tolerated or even ordained such sacrifices: “Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?” (Mic 6.7)

Several scholars have understood this text as proclaiming the absurdity of child sacrifice,<sup>6</sup> but the opposite is more probable: after mentioning rams and oil, it represents child sacrifice as the most valuable of all offerings.<sup>7</sup> In this case the recipient of the sacrifice would naturally be taken to be YHWH, which implies that he at least permits it. A surprising passage in Ezekiel goes even further and suggests that it was YHWH himself who inaugurated this practice: “Moreover I gave them also statutes that were not good and ordinances by which they could not live. And I defiled them through their very gifts, in that they caused to pass (through the fire) all their firstborn, in order that I might horrify them, so that they might know that I am the LORD.”<sup>8</sup> (Ezek 20.25–26)

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection*, 238, n. 1. to ch. 6.

<sup>6</sup> E. g. Knöppler, “Menschenopfer [Human sacrifice] III,” col. 1086–88.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection*, 11.

<sup>8</sup> I have slightly modified the translation given in NRSV.

This time there is no doubt: if YHWH ordered the offering of children,<sup>9</sup> then it was surely not meant for another god. We can agree with Noort: “Thus, in reality, a situation did exist in which child sacrifice was part of the service of YHWH and it was understood as being ordered by him.”<sup>10</sup>

Let us now examine more closely to whom, according to the biblical passages, these child sacrifices were offered. First of all we are faced with the problem of Molech which remains still unsolved despite the enormous literature written about it.<sup>11</sup> Earlier, Molech/Moloch was considered quite self-evidently as a bloodthirsty “pagan” god and this view still has its defenders. By this interpretation, Molech would be a chthonic deity honored by the sacrifice of small children. According to the other opinion, put forward first by Eißfeldt in 1935 and since then accepted and elaborated by numerous respected biblical scholars, *mlk* is not the name of a deity but derives from the root *jlk* > *wlk* (“to go”) as a causative nominal formation and is the name of a special offering.<sup>12</sup> This would mean that *mlk* sacrifices were not offered to some gruesome foreign god, but (also) to YHWH. The debate is not yet resolved, and both opinions have their partisans, but for our purpose the outcome is not particularly important.

The problem itself, and the difficulty of solving it, nevertheless draws attention to an interesting fact, namely that it is by no means easy to discover to whom these child sacrifices were offered. In the great majority of the aforementioned biblical passages the recipient of the sacrifice is not referred to at all; in others it is only “them,” meaning the foreign gods or idols. In Jer 19.5 “unto Baal” was added probably later on the assumption that every bad thing must be connected with Baal.

<sup>9</sup> We will not enter into the question why YHWH has given to his people “statutes that were not good” (Ezek 20.25), see on this e.g. Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection*, 6–10 (with a summary of the proposed solutions).

<sup>10</sup> Noort “Genesis 22,” 8. Even Grappe and Marx admit that human sacrifices were actually offered to YHWH, too, see *Sacrifices scandaleux*, 45. My thanks go to Péter Dávidházi for having called my attention to this book.

<sup>11</sup> “Few problems have been examined as thoroughly as the sacrifice of *Molek* among the Phoenicians and the Hebrews,” wrote Green in 1975, *The Role of Human Sacrifice in the Near East*, 180.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Noort, “Genesis 22,” 11; Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection*, 18–19; Green, *The Role of Human Sacrifice*, 180–87.

From this uncertainty we can conclude that the recipient of child sacrifices was not really important, at least for the authors of the biblical books who considered the rite an abomination, quite independently of the fact whether it was offered to YHWH or some other deity. Or we may suppose, if it actually was sometimes offered to YHWH, that biblical authors were not inclined to emphasize this fact. Later on we shall see that classical Greek and Latin authors are on this point equally vague.

The situation in Israel could have been the following: during the 8<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE child sacrifice was offered to YHWH as well as to other gods. The Deuteronomistic reform of Josiah prohibited it, whether offered to YHWH or not. Therefore in the passages uttered against it (and we have only such passages) it is depicted as part of the idolatrous habit of the “nations,” and as such it must naturally have been directed to foreign gods.

More important for us than the question of the recipient of this sacrifice would be the reason for it, but here again we have not much to lean upon. It seems that the practice of child sacrifice could be regular or occasional,<sup>13</sup> but the intention behind it is not obvious in either case. Koch describes it (rightly or not) “as a rite to astral gods in which *ru<sup>a</sup>h* is sent back to the deity.”<sup>14</sup> We can assume that it was practiced in extreme emergency, as perhaps in the case of Ahaz and Manasseh. The only occasion where it has an expiatory value is Mic 6.7, but there it appears only as a (more or less absurd) possibility, therefore we cannot infer from this that children were actually offered in order to redeem the sins of their parents.

This type of sacrifice had (at least originally) nothing to do with the offering of the firstborn son to YHWH. Boys and girls were offered equally and the order of birth played no role. Some texts, however, connect the two (Ezek 20.26; Mic 6.7).

We will now turn our attention to those three passages of the Hebrew Bible in which concrete cases of human sacrifice are described. Contrary to the biblical verses examined till now, these texts do not condemn human sacrifice: two of them merely report the facts without passing judgment; the third, however, exalts the father (Abraham) who is willing to kill his son.

<sup>13</sup> “The character of the polemics in the Hebrew Bible suggests a mixture of both possibilities,” Noort, “Genesis 22,” 13.

<sup>14</sup> Noort, “Genesis 22,” 9; Koch, “Molek astral,” in *Mythos im AT und seiner Umwelt*, ed. Lange et al., 44.

## THE KING OF MOAB

When his city was besieged and there was no hope left, Mesha, king of Moab, “took his firstborn son who was to succeed him, and offered him as a burnt offering (‘*olāh*) on the wall. And great wrath (קֶצֶף) came upon Israel, so they withdrew from him and returned to their own land” (2 Kings 3.27).

Thus in a situation of extreme peril in which otherwise everybody would have died, the king saves the city (and himself) by giving the most valuable offering: his only son and heir. The text does not name the god to whom the sacrifice was offered, but it must have been Chemosh, the national god of the Moabites.<sup>15</sup> Anyway, the result was exactly what the king hoped for: the Israelites fled. Their reason for doing so was not their disgust, as several translations suggest, but the anger of the deity directed against them (קֶצֶף means “anger, wrath”); in other words, in the eyes of the biblical author Mesha’s sacrifice “worked”: “Chemosh, the national god of Moab, receives the sacrifice and transfers his anger to the enemies outside the wall.”<sup>16</sup> This means that for the narrator (and probably also for his readers) Mesha’s behavior was understandable and even acceptable,<sup>17</sup> which proves that the views of Israel and its neighbors concerning human sacrifice were not radically different. It would be interesting to know exactly how and why the Israelites departed: without a fight, or after a battle in which they realized they had no chance against the anger of the god. The short notice of 2 Kings 3.27 suggest rather the first possibility: seeing the sacrifice, the Israelites knew that they cannot resist the wrath of the god, just as we shall see with the Greeks in the case of Codrus.

Similar cases (whether real or mythical) of human sacrifices offered in situations of extreme peril can be found among the Greeks and Romans, too, not to mention Carthage, as we shall see in the following chapter. However,

<sup>15</sup> Cf. 1 Kings 11.7,33; 2 Kings 23.13; Jer 48.7,13; Chemosh also figures on the Mesha inscription as standing at the head of the army of Moab. See on Chemosh e.g. Gese, Höfner and Rudolph, *Die Religionen Altsyriens, Altarabiens und der Mandäer*, in *Die Religionen der Menschheit*, ed. Schröder, 10.2: 140–41; Mattingly, “Chemosh (Deity),” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* 1, ed. Freedman, 895–97.

<sup>16</sup> Noort, “Child Sacrifice in Ancient Israel: The Status Quaestionis,” in *The Strange World of Human Sacrifice*, ed. Bremmer, 110; cf. Noort, “Genesis 22,” 13.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection*, 15.

Mesha's sacrifice is quite different from the aforementioned child sacrifices, and the young heir apparent was probably not a small child.<sup>18</sup>

### JEPHTHAH'S DAUGHTER (JUDG 11.30–40)

Before going into the decisive battle against the Ammonites, Jephthah makes a vow to the Lord: if he returns victorious he will offer up as a burnt offering (*'olāh*) "whoever/whatever (אִשֶּׁר) comes out of the doors of [his] house to meet" him (11.31). As it happens, it is his daughter, his only child. She accepts her fate and only asks for permission to go for two months and wander upon the mountains with her companions to bewail her virginity. After this, "she returned to her father, who did with her according to the vow he had made" (11.39).

The story makes it clear that Jephthah did not intend to sacrifice his daughter; but what sort of sacrifice could he have meant by the vow? Scholarly opinions diverge on this point and several solutions have been proposed<sup>19</sup>; 1. Jephthah intended to sacrifice an animal<sup>20</sup>; 2. the gravity of the situation and the expression "to meet me" suggest that he had in mind a human being, probably a household servant; 3. Jephthah's language is intentionally left ambivalent by the narrator, so that we cannot know what his real intentions were. The wording of verse 11.31 ("whoever/whatever [אִשֶּׁר]") permits any of the three solutions, but the majority of scholars now opt for the second possibility. I find myself on their side: it can hardly be expected that any other animal but a dog would come out of the house to meet his lord on his return (surely not sheep and cattle). Jephthah's tragedy was caused only by the fact that it happened to be his daughter who came first to meet him, and not one of his slaves.

Since the text dwells upon the bewailing of the girl's virginity, some have presumed that she was not sacrificed, but consecrated as a priestess and had to remain unmarried all her life.<sup>21</sup> According to the text, however,

<sup>18</sup> We do not have to presume that it was connected with a vow, *pace* Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection*, 17.

<sup>19</sup> Butler, *Judges*, vol. 8 of *Word Biblical Commentary*, ed. Metzger, 287–88.

<sup>20</sup> Grappe and Marx, *Sacrifices scandaleux*, 49.

<sup>21</sup> Marcus defends this view; for the *status questionis* see also Marcus, *Jephthah and his Vow*, 8–12.

Jephthah “did with her according to the vow,” that is, he offered her as a burnt offering.

For the author of the text it is perfectly normal that before a decisive battle a general vows to make human sacrifice to the Lord and then carries it out (for a vow, once pronounced, must be fulfilled). The story of Jephthah does not condemn human sacrifice or the pronouncing of a vow, it is directed only against hasty vows made without deliberation.<sup>22</sup> It dates probably from the time of the Judges when such vows may have been normal and suggests that the ancient Israelites perhaps made use of human sacrifices in the case of great national danger.<sup>23</sup> It is interesting, nevertheless, that the Deuteronomistic editors left it as it was.

Noort, when treating child sacrifice, dismisses the case of Jephthah’s daughter because “she is not the victim of a specific, ‘normal’ ritual, but of an extraordinary situation following Jephthah’s vow.”<sup>24</sup> In fact, this situation was not extraordinary at all and similar cases are known from several other nations, too. It is, however, necessary to emphasize that in this case we are not dealing with child sacrifice: the vow was not aimed at a child, and it happened only by chance that Jephthah’s daughter had to be sacrificed, who, in any case, was not a small child but a young girl.

## THE AQEDAH

The third text describing an actual human sacrifice is Gen 22, in later Jewish tradition called the Aqedah (from the word “to bind” in Gen 22.9).

It is not my intention to analyze this episode in detail or to summarize the immense literature written about its interpretation, but merely to make some points which seem important to me with regard to our topic.

As to the interpretation of Abraham’s sacrifice, the happy ending of the story (namely that Isaac is not killed) is completely irrelevant. Abraham is

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<sup>22</sup> According to Grappe and Marx the story is intended to suggest that ultimately Jephthah’s vow and sacrifice were quite superfluous because YHWH had already promised his help to him, *Sacrifice scandaleux*, 55. Be this as it may, YHWH accepted the sacrifice without protest.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Caquot, “Les religions des sémites occidentaux,” in *Histoire des religions*, ed. Puech, *Encyclopédie de la Pléiade* 1: 406; Bergmann, *In the Shadow of Moloch*, 76–77.

<sup>24</sup> Noort, “Genesis 22,” 13.



really prepared to sacrifice his beloved son as a burnt offering (*‘olāh*, Gen 22.2), and it is absolutely not thanks to him that Isaac survives (we shall see that Rabbinic tradition considered the sacrifice as actually accomplished).

“The story,” told in a very laconic way, “keeps to a deliberate uncertainty about the emotional state of its characters,”<sup>25</sup> first and foremost Abraham. Why is he willing to fulfil the command so promptly, almost eagerly, and without asking any questions, as he did for the sake of Sodom (Gen 18.22–33)? There is just one detail which is perhaps telling, namely, that until the very last moment he keeps secret what he is up to—a fact from which we can deduce that he could not count on the agreement of the others, Isaac included (we must not forget that the boy had to be bound before being laid on the altar). This impression is strengthened by the plural used in Gen 22.5: Abraham tells the servants to stay where they are until “*we* will worship and then *we* will come back to you.” It seems that he wishes to deceive the servants, unless we presume that he anticipated a happy ending to the story, though there is nothing in the text which could justify such a supposition.

According to the most commonly accepted interpretation, the meaning of the Aqedah is that YHWH does not (or does no longer) demand human sacrifice.<sup>26</sup> In recent times, however, the absurdity of this statement has been pointed out by several scholars. LaCocque (somewhat cynically) argues that if this was the intention of the story, then we could expect that God would drive men to idolatry or adultery in order to demonstrate that these customs are not to be practiced.<sup>27</sup>

Levenson gives a very convincing refutation:

If the point of the aqedah is “abolish human sacrifice, substitute animals instead,” then Abraham cannot be regarded as having passed the test to which Gen 22:1 tells us God is here subjecting him. For Abraham obeys the command to sacrifice Isaac without cavil and desists—knife in hand, Isaac bound on the altar over the firewood—only when the angel calls to

<sup>25</sup> van Bakkum, “The Aqedah and its Interpretation in Midrash and Piyyut,” in *The Sacrifice of Isaac*, ed. Noort and Tigchelaar, 87.

<sup>26</sup> Levenson calls it a “consensus of extraordinary breadth,” *Death and Resurrection*, 12.

<sup>27</sup> LaCocque, “Thou Shalt Not Kill,” in *Thinking Biblically*, ed. Ricoeur and LaCocque, 105–6.

him from heaven. And the burden of the angelic address is not that the slaughter of Isaac is offensive or that the ram is a preferable victim, but that it is Abraham's *willingness to sacrifice his son* that verifies his fear of God.<sup>28</sup>

Let me add that if the message of Gen 22 was the abolition of human sacrifice, then it completely missed its point: before the emergence of modern biblical criticism nobody ever understood the story this way. On the contrary, all ancient interpreters agree in praising Abraham for his willingness to sacrifice his son.<sup>29</sup>

The moral unanimously drawn from Gen 22 by Christian theologians and priests is that the believer, following the example of Abraham, must be ready to renounce what is most precious to him if the Lord wishes it. Here again, two completely different matters are confused: to accept the loss of a child is not identical with slaughtering him.

According to a number of biblical scholars the Aqedah resulted from a situation where a father, through a great danger, almost lost his son who was finally saved against every expectation. I cannot accept this hypothesis, because it does not explain why the father had to kill his son.<sup>30</sup>

Others connect the offering of Isaac with the sacrifices of the firstborn<sup>31</sup> (this would mean that YHWH claimed only what was due to him, and finally renounced even this) which again I cannot accept: Isaac was not the firstborn son of Abraham.

The dating of Gen 22.1–14 is controversial and in recent times a post-exilic date has seemed more preferable, but no decisive arguments have been put forward for it. In fact, the story fits much better into an earlier period, when human sacrifice was known and occasionally practiced, while perhaps

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<sup>28</sup> Levenson, *Death and Resurrection*, 13. Similarly Grappe and Marx remark that this demonstration is somewhat ambiguous as it was God himself who asked for the sacrifice, *Sacrifices scandaleux*, 40.

<sup>29</sup> Thus according to Sir 44.20–21 Abraham received the blessing of the Lord *because* he was willing to sacrifice Isaac.

<sup>30</sup> The same is true for the solution proposed by Grappe and Marx: when everything seems to be lost, God by his intervention changes the situation, *Sacrifices scandaleux*, 41.

<sup>31</sup> Grappe and Marx, *Sacrifices scandaleux*, 31; Levenson replaces “firstborn” sons by “beloved” sons, *The Death and Resurrection*, 111–12.

opposed by certain groups.<sup>32</sup> Efforts to distinguish different layers in it are rather speculative, given the lack of firm criteria.<sup>33</sup>

There is a characteristic of the Abraham story which, as far as I know, has not been remarked before and which seems to me very important. Till now efforts have been made to detect the reasons leading to human sacrifice, and even if they are not always clear to us, we have to presume that to commit such an act a very strong motivation was needed (e.g. to save the whole community through the death of a single person). The offering of Isaac, however, has no reason at all, at least from the human point of view (and this is the only one we are interested in). Abraham is willing to slaughter his son without wishing to obtain anything through his sacrifice, no escape from any danger, no remission of sins, no fertility, nothing at all. He offers his son “just because.” This completely irrational aspect of the Aqedah and the fact that it fits none of the known paradigms will play an important role in its later interpretation.

## FOUNDATION SACRIFICES

According to 1 Kings 16.34 Hiel the Bethelite rebuilt Jericho during the reign of Ahab: “He laid its foundation at the cost of Abiram his firstborn, and set up its gates at the cost of his youngest son Segub, according to the word of the LORD, which he spoke by Joshua son of Nun” (cf. Josh 6.26). Except for these two biblical verses, the relation between which is not clear (it cannot be decided which of them influenced the other), nothing is known about foundation sacrifices and therefore it cannot be determined whether such rites were practiced by the Israelites or not.<sup>34</sup> Noort presumes that the children of Hiel were killed in an accident during the rebuilding of Jericho.<sup>35</sup> But whatever happened, the curse of Joshua makes sense only if foundation sacrifices were known in Israel, because this story implies that Jericho can be rebuilt only at such a cost.

<sup>32</sup> Probably Noort is right in stating: “The story reflects a stage in which the possibility that child sacrifice belongs to the YHWH cult is present,” see “Genesis 22,” 20.

<sup>33</sup> Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, in *Word Biblical Commentary*, ed. Hubbard and Barker, 2: 105.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Green, *The Role of Human Sacrifice*, 169.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Noort, “Genesis 22,” 13.

## EXPIATORY SACRIFICES?

An expiatory sacrifice is what we call it when someone else, an innocent being, is immolated for the sin(s) of a person or a community; in this way the sin is “expiated,” that is, its consequences (the punishment) are nullified. Thus expiatory sacrifices must be distinguished from the punishment of sinners.<sup>36</sup>

In the pre-exilic layers of the OT we find practically nothing about expiatory rituals; only 1 Sam 3.14 suggests that in certain cases sins can be expiated “by sacrifice (זבח) and offering (מנחה).”

Post-exilic legislation mentions two sorts of sacrifice for the expiation of sins. *āšām* (אשם) ‘guilt-offering,’ ‘sacrifice for trespass’ is normally a ram offered to remedy mostly minor and often involuntary faults and impurities; the ritual and the special cases in which this sacrifice is needed are regulated in Lev (cf. 5; 6.10; 7; 14; 19.21,22). *ḥaṭṭā’t* (חטאת) ‘sin-offering,’ ‘expiatory offering’ (cf. Lev 4.ff., Num 15.22–31) could be offered for the unintentional sins of the high priest, the whole congregation, the ruler or any private person; the animal to be slaughtered is in the first two cases a bull, while for the ruler it is a male goat and for a private person a female goat or sheep. Evidently *āšām* and *ḥaṭṭā’t* are not identical since they figure side by side in Lev 7.37; but it is not clear what is the basis of the difference between them. Sometimes other kinds of sacrifices are also mentioned for the expiation of sins: *’olāh* (Lev 1.4; 9.7; 16.24; Ezek 45.15–17), *minḥāh* and *šelāmīm* (Ezek 45.15–17).

In fact, the yearly purification of Israel was achieved not by sacrifice but through the scapegoat ritual, described in Lev 16: all the transgressions and sins of Israel were put on the head of a goat which was then sent into the wilderness to carry away with it all the sins of the people.

The most important motif concerning expiation is found, however, in Lev 17.11: “For the life of the flesh is in the blood; and I have given it to you making atonement for your lives on the altar; for as life, it is the blood that makes atonement.”<sup>37</sup> This idea becomes later fundamental for the theologi-

<sup>36</sup> Thus, e.g. the three thousand men massacred following the preparation of the golden calf (Ex 32.27–28) cannot be considered as expiatory sacrifices since they were punished for their sin.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Seebaß, “Opfer [Sacrifice] II,” in *TRE* 25, 259–63.

cal understanding of atonement in Judaism and Christianity as well. This is stated quite clearly in Heb 9.22: "Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins."

As we see, expiation in general plays no great role in the Hebrew Bible: faults which could be remedied had to be remedied on the basis of the principle of "an eye for an eye"; greater sins, especially affronts against God, were punished by death. Expiation made sense only in the case of minor, mostly unintentional faults.

Human sacrifices are never mentioned in connection with atonement, and the scapegoat is a *goat*, not a human being (unlike in the somewhat similar *pharmakos* rituals of the Greeks). Certain cases, however, are recorded where the wrath of YHWH, aroused by some affront committed against him, could be appeased only through the effusion of innocent (human) blood. We shall now examine three such stories and try to decide whether they actually represent expiatory sacrifices or rather some other kind of ritual killing.

### *David and the Gibeonites (2 Sam 21.1–9)*

After three years of famine David asks the Lord the reason for it, and gets the answer that it has happened because of Saul who slew the Gibeonites. David delivers seven men of Saul's descendants to the Gibeonites, who hang them; and immediately the rain begins to fall, and the drought is finished. Here we clearly have to do with a case of ritual killing (vengeance), but it is hard to decide whether it can be considered as a human sacrifice. The story, at any rate, follows a well-known pattern: famine – oracle – discovery of the blood-guilt – killing (not of the guilty but some other persons instead of him) – end of the famine.<sup>38</sup> We should also remark that the persons killed were innocent of the sin of Saul yet their killing was (according to the biblical author) sanctioned by YHWH.

The circumstances of the slaughter are quite important: it happens at the beginning of harvest on the "hill before the Lord," in other words, the sanctuary of the Gibeonites. (As Burkert pointed out, the ceremony shows similarities with the Greek *pharmakos* rituals and the Oedipus story<sup>39</sup>). Probably it cannot be considered as an expiatory sacrifice, but rather as ritual ven-

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Burkert, *Structure and History in Greek Mythology and Ritual*, 66, cf. 171, n. 14.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

geance. As Williams states: "... the conceptual framework is that of group (family) corporateness, blood guilt and vengeance."<sup>40</sup>

### *The census of David (2 Sam 24)*

David commits a grave sin by numbering the people (from our point of view it does not matter that YHWH himself has instigated him to do so, the final aim of the whole action being the acquisition of the threshing floor of Arauna, where the temple was to be built). As a punishment, the Lord sends a pestilence in which seventy thousand men perish. He only repents when the destroying angel is before Jerusalem, and he stops the angel: "It is enough; now stay your hand" (24.16).

Thus seventy thousand innocent lives were needed to expiate the sin of the king. Neither here do we have to do with an expiatory sacrifice, only with "simple" punishment which befalls the innocent.

### *The sin of Jonathan (1 Sam 14.24–45)*

Jonathan, without knowing it, has violated the oath taken by his father that nobody should eat anything until evening. As a punishment, the Lord does not answer Saul when he asks him for counsel. It is clear that the trouble can be remedied only through the death of the sinner. The people, however, do not allow Jonathan to be killed; instead they "ransomed (רָפְדוּ) Jonathan, and he did not die" (14.45).

If Jonathan had been executed, it would have been simply the punishment of the sinner; but what did happen exactly? The verb פָּדָה, "to ransom" implies that a price was paid for the life of Jonathan. We can only guess what this price could have been, but it seems possible that it was the life of another (innocent) person. If so, then this was in fact an expiatory human sacrifice; but we have no evidence for this and it is most probable that Jonathan was ransomed through an animal sacrifice.

### *The Suffering Servant (Isa 53)*

In the Old Testament we find no voluntary sacrifices; the idea of "dying for" is unknown, and only the Suffering Servant in Isa 53 is sometimes mentioned as a possible exception. The latter text and its interpretation are, however, so problematical that we cannot treat it here in detail, and anyway it is

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<sup>40</sup> Cf. Williams, *Jesus' Death*, 161.

not strictly pertinent to our topic. We can be quite sure that Isa 53 does not describe a human sacrifice (whether voluntary or not) and probably the Servant does not even die. Though according to verse 8 “he was cut off from the land of the living,” from verse 10 it is evident that he continues to live and we can hardly presume that the author had resurrection in mind. Thus our question should be whether or not the idea of vicarious expiatory suffering is present in Isa 53. Even to this question we cannot give an unequivocally affirmative answer and, as Williams declares, it “probably should be considered an open one.”<sup>41</sup> The main problem is the interpretation of Isa 53.10. NRSV translates: “...when you make his life an offering for sin (אָשָׁם נָפְשׁוֹ) (אִם-תָּשִׂים) he shall see his offspring, and shall prolong his days” and remarks concerning the first part of the verse: “Meaning of Heb uncertain.” The difficulty consists mainly in deciding who is the subject of the verb “make” in the original Hebrew. Seebaß argues for נָפְשׁוֹ (“his self”) and translates: “Wenn sein Ich (*naepæs*) eine Schuldverpflichtung stellt, wird er Samen sehen, lang machen die Tage. [If his self acknowledges guilt, he shall see offspring, and prolong his days.]”<sup>42</sup> If this interpretation is correct then no expiatory sacrifice is meant in verse 10. Neither did the Septuagint understand it that way: “If you give guilt-offering, your soul (= you) will see a long-lived offspring.” A rather strong argument against the expiatory interpretation of the Servant’s suffering is that in early Judaism no such understanding of it can be attested.<sup>43</sup> Verse 7 compares the Servant to a lamb and a sheep: “He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,/ yet he did not open his mouth;/ like a lamb (חֵזֶן) that is led to the slaughter,/ and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent,/ so he did not open his mouth.” As Gess remarks: “Here for the first time a person is spoken of as fulfilling the function of a sacrificial animal.”<sup>44</sup> This comparison of the Servant to a lamb (LXX: ἄμνος) will be fundamental for the NT understanding of Jesus’ redeeming sacrifice.

The most we can say is that Isa 53 could be understood as referring to the expiatory suffering and perhaps even the death of someone for others. The NT made ample use of this kind of interpretation in explaining Jesus’ sacrificial death.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 111.

<sup>42</sup> Seebaß, “Opfer II,” 263.

<sup>43</sup> Williams, *Jesus’ Death*, 107–20.

<sup>44</sup> Gess, “Lamb,” in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. Brown, 2: 410.

An important motif of this text, which we should remark, is the positive value attributed to suffering. We shall see later, in connection with Jesus but even more with the martyrs, how important it becomes that the victim should not simply die but also suffer as much as possible.

## CONCLUSIONS

Human sacrifice was known and practiced more or less legally in ancient Israel at least during the 8<sup>th</sup>–7<sup>th</sup> century BCE and children were probably offered to YHWH as well. Child sacrifices took place perhaps even after the Babylonian exile, but after the reforms of Esdras and Nehemiah they disappear from religious practice. In religious ideology, however, a certain fascination with human sacrifice survives (due mainly to Abraham's act).

We find no case of human sacrifice which could clearly be described as expiatory. The following are the attested forms of it: child sacrifice in cases of emergency, and perhaps also regularly (rite to astral gods?); in the fulfilling of a vow; and during the construction of a building (probably not practiced, but known).

The sacrifice of Isaac fits in none of these patterns, as we have remarked before. It is unique in the whole (not only Israelite) history of human sacrifice simply because no human reason lies behind it. To put it somewhat crudely: Abraham expects nothing in return for his offering.

The sacrificed person is not presumed to agree with the sacrifice, let alone to be happy about it. This is true also for Jephthah's daughter: she simply has no choice in the matter, for she knows that a vow cannot be retracted.

The attitude of the biblical authors toward human sacrifice is ambiguous. When they speak about it in general, they condemn it and strive to attribute the practice to "the nations." But when relating special cases of such sacrifices they grow more tolerant and understanding, Abraham is even exalted for having perpetrated such an act.

The idea that the wrath of YHWH should be appeased through the immolation of (sometimes very numerous) innocent human lives seems quite acceptable for ancient Israel: when Saul violated the contract with the Gibeonites, seven of his male descendants had to be delivered to the latter (2 Sam 21.1–9); following the census of David (ordered by YHWH himself!) only the death of seventy thousand people could prevent God's wrath (2 Sam 24). In these cases we are not dealing with human sacrifices: the former is rather a ritual revenge, the latter the punishment of a sin.



The notion of “dying for” is unknown in ancient Israel (even if Isa 53 was later understood in this way), and we shall not be surprised to discover that there are no “martyrs” in the Hebrew Bible. “Is there martyrdom in the Hebrew Bible?” asks Brettler in the title of his paper, and he answers in the negative.<sup>45</sup> He is clearly right, but it is perhaps worthwhile to imagine for a moment how all those persons of ancient Israelite history who died and suffered for YHWH could so easily have been turned into martyrs. According to later Christian martyrology all those who die fighting for God are considered as martyrs, and from the point of view of biblical historiography the Israelites are always fighting for God. In the same way, all the maltreated prophets could easily have become martyrs, as actually happened later with Isaiah. This attitude, however, is completely alien to biblical theology. Brettler explains this by the fact that the expectation of otherworldly reward, which constitutes the prime motivation of choosing death instead of life, was absent.<sup>46</sup> His explanation, though not wrong in itself, somewhat misses the point. The interesting question is not: “Why there were no martyrs?” but rather: “Why were those persons not venerated as martyrs who quite easily could have been?” If we put the question this way, the answer probably would have to be that there was no cult of the dead in ancient Israel; but examination of this topic would lead us too far afield.

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<sup>45</sup> He remarks that the beginnings of martyrology can be detected in the Book of Esther and in Daniel, Brettler, “Is there Martyrdom in the Hebrew Bible?” 16. The former is not really relevant for us; the latter we shall treat in ch. 3 (Early Judaism), since mostly the Greek additions are important for our purpose.

<sup>46</sup> Brettler, “Is there Martyrdom in the Hebrew Bible?” 16.



## Greece, Rome and Carthage

### INTRODUCTION

In exploring the roots of Christian martyrdom in classical tradition, we must examine three different, yet more or less interrelated topics: human sacrifice, heroic death for others and noble death. From the start, I would like to emphasize that these three kinds of death are fundamentally different and therefore to be distinguished, even if they show some similarities. To make this clear, we must define these expressions as exactly as possible.

Human sacrifice, as we explained at the beginning,<sup>1</sup> is a religious act in which a human being is killed and offered to the deity. This can happen with the agreement of the victim or without it. What is important here is that the victim is sacrificed in order to please the god (who, in the majority of cases, expressly demanded the sacrifice through an oracle).

The other two cases are in reality not religious acts, even if sometimes they have religious connotations. Hengel writes: "...from the classical period onwards ἀποθνήσκειν ὑπὲρ (or: /ἐπι/διδόναι ἑαυτὸν ὑπὲρ) were a stereotyped expression for the voluntary sacrifice of a man's life in the interest of his native city, his friends, his family or also—quite peripherally—philosophical truth..."<sup>2</sup> As we see, death for the sake of philosophical truth appears here only "peripherally"; Hengel admits that these cases are quite rare and can enumerate only a handful of examples (Socrates, Hermias [the friend of Aristotle crucified by Alexander the Great] and Apollonius of Tyana

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<sup>1</sup> See Introduction, above 6–7

<sup>2</sup> Hengel, *The Atonement*, 9.

[who was willing to die for philosophy, but finally did not have to]). In my opinion these cases cannot be qualified as “heroic death for the sake of others,” and we shall treat the phenomenon we have called “to die for philosophical truth” under the category of “noble death.”

Heroic death in battle for the city or for the homeland is praised in innumerable literary works and inscriptions from early periods onward, and the idea is summarized in the famous adage of Horace: “*dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*.”<sup>3</sup> Heroic death normally does not include suicide, though the limits between bravely accepting death or courting it are hard to determine—the same as in the case of Christian martyrdom.

“Noble death” is not easy to define, as we shall see below. For the time being I would suggest the following: it means that a person deliberately chooses death in order to remain faithful to his code of life. Human sacrifice happens because of the divinity, heroic death because of the community, noble death because the individual is not willing to renounce his conviction or wants to avoid an unbearable or unworthy situation. Noble death is very often a suicide, but naturally a suicide can be considered as noble only when it is committed on the ground of some higher motivation (sometimes on divine order). We shall examine below if in the cases known to us religion played any role at all.

The rites of human sacrifice (or rather the descriptions we possess about it), of heroic death for the sake of others and of noble death all show certain similarities with martyrdom and probably influenced Christian martyrology, so we shall now turn to them one by one.

We shall not enter into general questions concerning Greek and Roman sacrifice (its origins, meaning, rituals and terminology) because this would lead us too far afield, and as we are interested only in certain special aspects of sacrificial practice we need not get involved in problems which do not concern our topic. The same goes for “noble death” and “heroic death”: a thorough treatment would be impossible within the framework of this book.

## HUMAN SACRIFICE IN GREECE

Classical Greek literature abounds in references to human sacrifice—even though archaeology has failed to furnish unequivocal proofs of such prac-

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<sup>3</sup> Horace, *Carmina* 3.2.13.

tices. But it is clear that in Greece human sacrifice was well known, whether because it was practiced by the Greeks themselves (perhaps in pre-historical times) or because they encountered it just among other peoples. For our purpose, just as in the case of ancient Israel, the relevant question is not whether the sacrifices reported by the literary sources actually took place or not, but what kinds of sacrifices were known and what reasons allegedly made them necessary. The topic of human sacrifice in Greece has been treated in some excellent monographs,<sup>4</sup> so we need not dwell on it further; instead, I shall present quite briefly the characteristic types of human sacrifices without enumerating all the special cases. There is, however, one question which is of utmost interest for us and which will need to be examined more closely, namely the transformation of human sacrifice into voluntary and heroic self-sacrifice.

### *Funerary sacrifice*

The only well-known example is the slaughter of twelve Trojan captives by Achilles on the pyre of Patroclus.

... He, when his hands grew weary with killing,  
 choose out and took twelve young men alive from the river  
 to be vengeance (ποινήν) for the death of Patroklos, the son of  
Menoitios.  
 These, bewildered with fear like fawns, he lead out to the water  
 and bound their hands behind them with thongs well cut out of the  
leather,  
 with the very belts they themselves wore on their ingirt tunics,  
 and gave them to his companions to lead away to the hollow ships

(*Iliad* 21.26–32;<sup>5</sup> cf. 18.334–37; 23.19–23, 179–83, 235–42)

<sup>4</sup> Friedrich Schwenn's fundamental book, *Menschenopfer bei den Griechen und Römern* is still very useful; see further: Hughes, *Human Sacrifice in Ancient Greece*; Burkert, *Greek Religion*; idem, *Homo necans: The Anthropology of Ancient Sacrificial Ritual and Myth*; idem, *Structure and History in Greek Mythology and Ritual*; Rudhardt and Reverdin, eds., *Le sacrifice dans l'Antiquité*; for further literature see Bremmer, ed., *The Strange World of Human Sacrifice*, 55, n. 2.

<sup>5</sup> Lattimore, trans., *The Iliad of Homer*, 419.

The interpretation of this scene is controversial: was it simply vengeance or was it really a sacrifice? The above mentioned passages never speak of sacrifice: the twelve young Trojans are called ποινή, ‘price, blood-money, requital, recompense’<sup>6</sup>; clearly, they are considered as requital for Patroclus’ death (the translation “vengeance” is quite correct). Can we presume that the twelve young Trojans were meant to serve Patroclus in the other world?<sup>7</sup> Can we infer from this scene that similar rituals were practiced in early times? Some cases of ritual killing by someone’s grave (Philip II,<sup>8</sup> Philopoemen<sup>9</sup>) are known from historical times, but there we have to do with vengeance and with the punishment of criminals, and nothing indicates that the slaughtered victims were meant as sacrifices to the dead. Later on we shall see a curious example of such a sacrifice in Euripides.

Since funerary sacrifices are not really important for our purpose, they need not detain us further.

### *Fulfilment of a vow*

On his return voyage from Troy, Idomeneus, king of Crete, vows during a storm to sacrifice the first thing(!)<sup>10</sup> he will encounter at home, if he arrives safely. And this happens to be his son.<sup>11</sup> The same motif appears in the story of Lophis and of Maiandros.<sup>12</sup> These examples clearly show that Jephthah’s case fits perfectly into a well-known pattern.

<sup>6</sup> Liddel and Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 1431.

<sup>7</sup> According to Schwenn the dragging of Hector’s body thrice around the pyre (*Iliad* 22.395–404; 23.6–14) means that he was destined to serve Patroclus thereafter and his soul became Patroclus’ property, *Menschenopfer*, 68.

<sup>8</sup> During the funeral of his father Alexander executed the accomplices in his assassination, cf. Justins, *Epitome* 18.2.1, cf. Hughes, *Human Sacrifice*, 56–57.

<sup>9</sup> Philopoemen was an Achaean general taken captive and later executed by the Messenians (182 BCE). When the Achaeans defeated Messene, a group of Messenian prisoners was stoned to death around the tomb of Philopoemen, cf. Plutarch, *Philopoemen* 18.4 – 21.5; Hughes, *Human Sacrifice*, 58.

<sup>10</sup> “...devovit sacrificaturum se de re, quae ei primum occurrisset,” Servius commentarius in Vergilii *Aeneida* 3.21 quoted by Schwenn, *Menschenopfer*, 124. n. 1. Thus, contrary to Jephthah, he probably did not mean a human being.

<sup>11</sup> Hughes, *Human Sacrifice*, 76; Schwenn, *Menschenopfer*, 123–24.

<sup>12</sup> Hughes, *Human Sacrifice*, 76; Schwenn, *Menschenopfer*, 125.

*To avert extreme danger*

The majority of human sacrifices known from Greek sources belong to this category.<sup>13</sup> We shall not distinguish between “mythical” and “historical” cases—on the one hand because it does not matter for us (as we have pointed out above) whether a sacrifice is mythical or historical, and on the other hand because those presented as “historical” probably never actually happened, as has been convincingly proved.<sup>14</sup>

The pattern is always the same: the whole city/army/country is threatened by some great danger which only can be averted by sacrificing someone to the god/gods/hero/demons. The solution is always indicated by an oracle and the person to be sacrificed is always of noble descent, a young man or a virgin, possibly the son or daughter of the king or general of the city/army in question (the daughters of Erechtheus, the daughters of Hyacinthus, the daughters of Leos; Macaria, Menoeceus etc.). The danger was brought about by the wrath of the deity who can only be appeased in this way.

Somewhat different from these is the alleged sacrifice of Themistocles before the battle of Salamis,<sup>15</sup> where the victims were not noble Athenians but Persian captives, though equally noble.

In the case of Iphigeneia (which we shall treat in more detail below) the human sacrifice is needed not in order to avoid some mortal danger but merely to obtain favorable winds. Similarly, according to Herodotus, Menelaus and Helene were able to sail from Egypt at the price of sacrificing two Egyptian children.<sup>16</sup>

*Cultic sacrifices to a god*

The aforementioned sacrifices were special cases offered in extreme situations, but Greek literature also knows of human sacrifices performed regu-

<sup>13</sup> Hughes, *Human Sacrifices*, 71–138; Schwenn, *Menschenopfer*, 75–81; 121–39.

<sup>14</sup> See e.g. Hughes, *Human Sacrifice*, 107–15; Versnel, “Quid Athenis et Hierosolymis?,” 188; Heinrichs, “Human Sacrifice in Greek Religion,” 194–242. These authors also argue convincingly against the historicity of Themistocles’ famous sacrifice before the battle of Salamis (see Plutarch, *Themistocles* 13.2–5).

<sup>15</sup> Plutarch, *Themistocles* 13.2–5 (see *Aristides* 9; *Pelopidas* 21); cf. Schwenn, *Menschenopfer*, 75, n. 2; Hughes, *Human sacrifice*, 111–15; and see previous note.

<sup>16</sup> 2.119; cf. Hughes, *Human Sacrifice*, 77; Schwenn, *Menschenopfer*, 125. See also the fictive story of Sinon who pretended that he was chosen to be sacrificed in order to placate the winds, Vergil, *Aeneid* 2.108–44, cf. Schwenn, *Menschenopfer*, 123; Hughes, *Human Sacrifice*, 227, n. 25.

larly in the cult of a god or a hero. Herodotus describes a curious ritual connected to the sanctuary of Zeus Lophistios in Alos, where the descendants of Athamas are sacrificed (7.197). In fact, the story is extremely confused, and Hughes presumes that no real sacrifice took place and that only a ritual drama was enacted.<sup>17</sup>

The cult of Zeus Lykaios in Arcadia, during whose rituals a human victim was not only slaughtered but also eaten is very well documented. Plato is the first to mention it (*Republic* 8.565D–E), and it found its way into Augustine’s *City of God* (18.17). Archaeology, however, has found nothing to confirm the reality of these sacrifices (which, of course, is no conclusive argument against their existence).<sup>18</sup>

According to tradition, the Lesbians offered human beings to Dionysus Omestes, the Phocaeans to Artemis Tauropolos, and we all know the account of the tribute of young girls and boys sent yearly by the Athenians to the Minotaur in Crete. A number of other stories of this kind could be listed.

In these cases the reason for the bloodthirsty ritual was always an affront against the divinity. The stories relating these cruel customs often affirm that they belong to the remote past and were stopped by the divinity itself (through a sign) or by a hero (e.g. Theseus). But relatively late writers, such as Pausanias, Plutarch and even Porphyry, mention human sacrifices practiced in their times.

### *Pharmakoi*

Contrary to the case in ancient Israel, in numerous Greek cities human “scapegoats”—*pharmakoi*—were used for the purification of the city. “The essential element of the ritual was the expulsion from the community of one or two persons called (at least in Ionia, Athens and Abdera) *pharmakoi*, with the expressed purpose of purifying the city. In the different cities the *pharmakoi* were variously dressed and decorated, paraded about the city, whipped with fig branches and squills, cursed, and pelted with stones. In the end they were driven across the city’s borders; according to some sources, they were killed.”<sup>19</sup>

Though the meaning of the ritual is not completely clear, it is evident that the expulsion of the *pharmakoi* was intended to have a cleansing effect,

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<sup>17</sup> Hughes, *Human Sacrifice*, 96.

<sup>18</sup> Schwenn, *Menschenopfer*, 20–25; Hughes, *Human Sacrifice*, 96–107.

<sup>19</sup> Hughes, *Human sacrifice*, 139.



to help to keep away pestilence and drought from the city, and to ensure a good harvest (in Athens and Ionia the expulsion of the *pharmakoi* happened at the pre-harvest festival, the Thargelia).<sup>20</sup>

Rituals of this kind are attested from a number of places and it seems they existed in Marseille even in Petronius' time.<sup>21</sup> Though a number of ancient sources know about *pharmakoi* who were killed at the end, their accounts do not seem very convincing and today scholars mostly presume that the *pharmakoi* were only driven out and not killed. If this is true, we cannot speak of human sacrifice in connection with the *pharmakos* ritual and, as Versnel notes, from the classical period onwards no historical example of vicarious atoning sacrifice is known.<sup>22</sup> Legend, however, related that the Athenians, because of the slaying of the Cylonian conspirators on the Acropolis (which involved the committing of a ritual sin), were punished by a plague. When they asked the Cretan priest Epimenides, he revealed the reason for the plague and declared that Attica must be expiated through human blood. Kratinos volunteered himself and his lover, Aristodemos, followed him in death. Thereupon the plague ceased.<sup>23</sup> According to Schwenn,<sup>24</sup> the two young men were meant as *pharmakoi*, but this is far from certain. It is not sure whether the whole story has anything to do with the *pharmakos* ritual and, as it appears quite late (in Athenaeus [3<sup>rd</sup> century AD], who refers it to Neanthes of Cyzicus [late 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE]),<sup>25</sup> Hughes is probably right in stating: "The story of the voluntary self-sacrifice of a beautiful youth and the suicide of his lover owes a clear debt to myth and Hellenistic romance."<sup>26</sup>

In fact, *pharmakoi* were not noble persons, but on the contrary, worthless, unimportant, and wretched people, often criminals. They were driven off

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Hughes, *Human sacrifice*, 140.

<sup>21</sup> The ritual is described by Petronius (quoted in Servius commentarius in Vergilii *Aeneida* 3.5) and by Lactantius Placidus (Scholia in Statii *Thebaida* 10.793). Though practised in Massilia, it seems to have been a Greek custom, and the Massilians who practiced it were probably of Greek origin, cf. Hughes, *Human Sacrifice*, 157–59. We shall return to this ritual in ch. 5. in connection with Dasius.

<sup>22</sup> Versnel, "Quid Athenis et Hierosolymis?," 188.

<sup>23</sup> As to the historicity of the story (accepted e.g. by Schwenn, *Die Menschenopfer*, 57–58) see Hughes, *Human sacrifice*, 155–56.

<sup>24</sup> Schwenn, *Die Menschenopfer*, 58.

<sup>25</sup> Athenaeus 13 602c (and not Athenagoras, as Hengel indicates, *Atonement*, 86, n. 75); Diogenes Laërtius 1. 110 (cf. Schwenn, *Die Menschenopfer*, 58).

<sup>26</sup> Hughes, *Human Sacrifice*, 155.

loaded with all the sins and impurities of the city, never to return, and their further fate is of no importance. This is radically different from the self-sacrifice of a noble and guiltless person. *Pharmakoi*, even if they often accepted their fate voluntarily, did not do so out of heroism but because of the advantages offered to them (e.g. of being fed at public cost for a certain time).

*Pharmakos* rituals might be held regularly on a certain feast day of the year (e.g. the Thargelia) or in the case of some extraordinary danger (e.g. in Marseilles on the occasion of a plague).

It is first and foremost a purifying ritual, not a sacrifice. If, however, the *pharmakos* is actually killed (at least as he was according to legend), we can probably call it a human sacrifice which atones for the sins of the others. It should be noted that whereas older sources never speak of ‘sacrifice’ or ‘sacrificing’ in connection with the *pharmakoi*, later sources freely apply these expressions to them,<sup>27</sup> which clearly proves that they could be considered as sacrifices. Moreover, as we shall see later, descriptions of *pharmakos* rituals probably influenced certain martyr narratives.

### *Voluntary sacrifices?*

As we are interested in the relation of martyrdom to human sacrifice, we would like to know first of all when and how the idea of voluntary human sacrifice first appeared. “In fact, a victim’s voluntary participation was an important part of Greek sacrificial ideology, which stressed that the victim was pleased to go up to the altar, sometimes could even hardly wait to be sacrificed”—writes Bremmer in connection with Iphigeneia.<sup>28</sup> Effectively, in the case of animal sacrifices the sacrificers presumed the agreement of the victim, as part of the so-called “comedy of innocence.”<sup>29</sup> This phenomenon (present not only in Greece, but also in many other parts of the world) as described by Meuli, “goes back”—according to him—“to the world of the early hunters, who pretended that their game had offered itself voluntarily

<sup>27</sup> See the passages quoted by Schwenn, *Die Menschenopfer*, 36–37, n. 5.

<sup>28</sup> Bremmer, “Sacrificing a Child,” 30.

<sup>29</sup> See Meuli, “Griechische Opferbrauche,” 995–97. Cf. Bremmer, *The Strange World of Human Sacrifice*, 4; Bremmer, “Myth and Ritual in Greek Human Sacrifice,” 62; Burkert, *Homo necans*, 3–4; see also above Introd., 8; Meuli’s views have been much debated. About the alleged compliance of the animal victim see also Barton, “Honor and Sacredness in the Roman and Christian Worlds,” 38, n. 39 (with further bibliography); Versnel, “Self-sacrifice,” 147; Vernant, “Théorie générale du sacrifice et mise à mort dans la *thusia* grecque,” 7.

so that they would not be guilty of their death. The idea lasted a long time and could also be found in Greek representations of human sacrifice.”<sup>30</sup> It is true that the idea of an animal presenting itself willingly before the altar or at least accepting compliantly to be slaughtered appears in Greek legend from an early time, and Aristophanes ironizes about the consenting nod of the animal (*Peace* 960). But is it equally true for human sacrifice? According to Versnel, the conviction that the voluntary death of a person could save the community from extreme peril is deeply rooted in the myths of Greece and Rome, and was later elaborated by Euripides.<sup>31</sup> For my part, I am inclined to believe the development was the exact reverse: for before Euripides we have almost no mention of heroic self-sacrifice.

Menoceus may be an invention of Euripides,<sup>32</sup> and Macaria perhaps too.<sup>33</sup> Polyxena is better attested and her story was told by the Epic Cycle, but nothing indicates that her death was considered there as voluntary.<sup>34</sup> The same is true for Iphigeneia, as we shall see below. Hughes supposes that “perhaps some myths of the willing self-sacrifice of noble young women and men in time of war ... also appeared in early epic,”<sup>35</sup> which is possible but not certain at all, because the stories as we have them now are much later. The daughters of Hyacinthus appear in relatively late sources (Ps-Demosthenes, Apollodorus), as do the daughters of Leos (Ps-Demosthenes, Pausanias); the story of Erechtheus is told by Lycurgus who quotes a long passage from Euripides; and so on. The Lycaon myth indeed goes back to the 6<sup>th</sup> century, but has nothing to do with voluntary sacrifice.

Herodotus describes several cases of human sacrifices by other peoples (none of them voluntary<sup>36</sup>) and one or two instances among the Greeks, too. Concerning the Athamas myth (7.197) his report is so confused that we cannot really tell what happened, but it is clear that the victim did not volunteer (many of those who were in danger of being sacrificed went into exile). Herodotus also reports that Menelaus sacrificed two Egyptian chil-

<sup>30</sup> Bremmer, *The Strange World of Human Sacrifice*, 4.

<sup>31</sup> Versnel, “Quid Athenis,” 186.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Hughes, *Human Sacrifice*, 74.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. “Makaria,” in *Der Kleine Pauly* 3, 907; Hengel, *Atonement*, 23.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Bremmer, “Myth and Ritual in Greek Human Sacrifice,” 59.

<sup>35</sup> Hughes, *Human Sacrifice*, 189.

<sup>36</sup> With the exception of a “suttee” among the Thracians, where the wives of the dead chieftain compete with one another for the honor of being slain on the tomb (Herodotus 5.5).

dren in order to obtain favorable winds (2.119), but naturally we do not have to presume that the children volunteered for this role. The only case where Herodotus describes a voluntary self-sacrifice is that of Leonidas (7.220–21): he remains at Thermopylae in a desperate situation where he is sure to die because an oracle had declared that the Persians will destroy Sparta unless their king should die. But here Leonidas is not really sacrificed, he dies by the hand of the enemy, so we should put this case rather in the category of “heroic death.”

In Aeschylus, as it has been pointed out, human sacrifices play an important role.<sup>37</sup> The most well-known of them is naturally the case of Iphigeneia (which we shall treat below in somewhat more detail), but the murder of Agamemnon, Cassandra and Clytaemnestra are also represented as sacrifices, yet none of these is voluntary as the victim is certainly not willing to die.

Hengel admits that “the idea of the heroic, voluntary and vicarious death for the good of the homeland became familiar to the whole Graeco-Roman world” through the plays of Euripides, but adds: “Of course the subject appears in ancient sagas very much more frequently than in the material used by Euripides.”<sup>38</sup> To support his statement he enumerates several myths concerning voluntary sacrifices; but if we examine them more closely we discover that none of them can be dated with any certainty to early times. The voluntary death of the two young men in Athens<sup>39</sup> is probably an invention of Neanthes, and as such quite late (3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE); the motif of the “self-sacrifice of sisters” is indeed quite popular, but nothing indicates that it is ancient.<sup>40</sup> Hengel mentions in particular the case of the Boeotian sisters, Menippe and Metioche, daughters of Orion, who offer themselves willingly in order to deliver their city from pestilence, a story which is first attested, as far as we know, in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE.<sup>41</sup> The myth appeared according to Antoninus Liberalis also in Corinna (6<sup>th</sup> century) and perhaps in Chaeremon. Thus the myth seems to be quite old, but we do not know if in the original version the sacrifice of the two young girls was voluntary or not.

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<sup>37</sup> Cf. Hughes, *Human Sacrifice*, 189.

<sup>38</sup> Hengel, *Atonement*, 21.

<sup>39</sup> See above, 37.

<sup>40</sup> We have seen this above concerning the daughters of Hyacinthus, Erechtheus and Leos respectively.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Hughes, *Atonement*, 74; Schwenn, *Die Menschenopfer*, 55, n. 3.

Among men who sacrificed themselves voluntarily Hengel mentions Marathon and Codrus. The story about the self-sacrifice of a person named Marathon (the eponymous hero of the city) before the battle when the Dioscuri invaded Attica was probably invented during the Persian period.<sup>42</sup> The case of Codrus is quite relevant. According to an oracle the Peloponnesians would be able to defeat Athens provided that they do not kill its king. Codrus, the last king of Athens, having learnt about the oracle, disguised himself in a beggar, provoked a quarrel with the enemy and managed to get himself killed. When the Peloponnesians discovered what has happened, they departed without fighting. This story is very well documented from early times on; it appears in Pherecydes (first half of the 5<sup>th</sup> century) and in Hellanicus (5<sup>th</sup> century).<sup>43</sup> It seems, however, that according to another, probably older version Codrus simply died in the battle.<sup>44</sup> This is probably what actually happened and later his death became understood as a voluntary sacrifice for the city.<sup>45</sup>

In sum, my point is the following: before Euripides there was no such a “sacrificial ideology” which implied that the human victim had to agree to be killed; human sacrifices, if mentioned at all, were cases where a human being was slaughtered by others and offered to a god, and the attitude of the victim was of no importance.<sup>46</sup> The idea that someone voluntarily offers him/herself to be sacrificed is practically absent from the earlier literary material known to us.<sup>47</sup> If we look for voluntarily accepted (violent) death we shall find it elsewhere. On the one hand, voluntariness is well attested in the case of animal victims who, according to a “comedy of innocence”, are presumed to accept their fate gladly, or even volunteer for it. On the other hand, from early periods onward Greek authors celebrated the heroic and freely accepted death of a person fighting against the enemy in order to save the

<sup>42</sup> Hengel, *Atonement*, 22.

<sup>43</sup> The earliest extant account of the saga appears in Lycurgus, *Oratio in Leocratem* 20 (84–89), cf. Hengel, *Atonement*, 82, n. 48.

<sup>44</sup> Strabo 9.393; 14.653; Cicero, *De natura deorum* 3.49; 5.62.

<sup>45</sup> “Kodros,” in *Der Kleine Pauly* 3, 264–65.

<sup>46</sup> Naturally we are concerned with the appearances of human sacrifices in literature, not with the realities, of which we know nothing.

<sup>47</sup> Even in later texts the great majority of passages describing human sacrifices mention only the fact in itself, e.g.: “when plague and famine beset the city [=Athens] ... the Athenians slew the daughters of Hyacinthus”, Apollodorus, *Bibliothèque* 3.15.8; cf. Schwenn, *Die Menschenopfer*, 131.

many (which, naturally, has nothing to do with human sacrifice and which we shall treat under the category “heroic death for the homeland”). Euripides combines the willingness of the sacrificial animal and of the hero dying on the battlefield with human sacrifice, and in this way transforms the latter into a heroic and voluntary self-sacrifice.<sup>48</sup> Because this transformation is in my opinion the crucial moment in the development of the so-called “sacrificial ideology,” when (according to Halbertal’s terminology) “to sacrifice to” becomes “to sacrifice for,” we shall analyze it in detail.

### *Euripides*

We shall now investigate human sacrifices in the plays of Euripides. We leave out of consideration *Alceste* who offers herself for her husband, as well as the plays *Protesilaus* and *Phrixos*, from which only short fragments are preserved. Neither is the *Bacchantes* of any relevance for us, because, even if its plot is about human sacrifice offered to Dionysus the sacrifice is in no way voluntary. We shall treat the plays of Euripides in the order as they were written.<sup>49</sup>

#### The children of Heracles (430 BCE)

The oracle requires the sacrifice of a virgin of noble birth to Koré (408–9). No further qualifications are given, neither is the virgin expected to volunteer for the task. Macaria, the daughter of Heracles, however, volunteers, and her motifs for doing so are the following:

- her life would be miserable if she didn’t offer herself for the others, therefore it is better to die (523–26);
- nothing can be better than to depart gloriously from life (533–34);
- she gives her life for “them,” i.e. her sisters and brothers (550–51);
- she sacrifices the hour of her wedding for their sake (579–80).

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<sup>48</sup> Hengel remarks that the voluntary nature of the sacrifice is stressed from the time of Euripides, see *Atonement*, 23, but he does not seem to realize that Euripides interprets these sacrifices according to the pattern of the “heroic death for the homeland.” Pucci too mentions Euripides’ “fondness for voluntary sacrifice, with its solemn and edifying connotations,” see Pucci, “Human Sacrifice in the *Oresteia*,” 514.

<sup>49</sup> Cf. “Euripides,” in *Der Kleine Pauly* 2, 441–42.

It is left open whether something awaits her in the otherworld; rather, she hopes that with death all her troubles will be over (595–96). Macaria, in contrast to Iphigeneia, does not die for her “homeland” but only to save her relatives. The sacrifice is fulfilled (821).

Hecuba (425? BCE)

Polyxena’s sacrifice, briefly mentioned later in the *The Trojan Women*, is described in *Hecuba* (1–629).<sup>50</sup> The sacrifice is expressly demanded by Achilles’ ghost who otherwise would not grant favorable winds for the Greeks’ return home, and Polyxena is actually slaughtered on Achilles’ grave.<sup>51</sup> She is a prize for Achilles (γέρας, 41, 96, 116–17), and her blood is given him to drink (536–38, cf. 392–93). We have here a very clear case of funerary sacrifice, but we do not have to presume that such sacrifices were actually practiced by the Greeks; it rather seems that Euripides combined the idea of human sacrifices with elements of the *Nekyia* of Homer, according to which it is blood the dead desire most of all.

Before dying, Polyxena declares in a long speech how much better it is to die than to live as a slave. Notwithstanding this, it causes her pain to leave her mother and the world.

When she is about to be killed, she does not permit anyone to touch her and offers her neck freely to the sword of Talthybius (547–49). At the last moment, she tears her *peplos* asunder and offers her breast to receive the mortal blow (558–65)—a provocative and totally superfluous gesture. In the end Talthybius cuts her throat and when she falls dying to the ground she takes care to fall decently and to hide what a man’s eyes must not see (568–70).

The Trojan Women (415 BCE)

This tragedy treats only briefly the sacrifice of Polyxena: she is slain at Achilles’ tomb as an offering to the dead (δῶρον ἀψύχῳ νεκρῷ, 619).<sup>52</sup>

<sup>50</sup> Concerning this scene see also the analysis of Bremmer, “Myth and Ritual in Greek Human Sacrifice,” 59–65.

<sup>51</sup> Hughes, *Human Sacrifice*, 61.

<sup>52</sup> Cf. Hughes, *Human Sacrifice*, 61.

*Iphigeneia in Tauris* (after 412? BCE)

Agamemnon promises to offer to Artemis the most beautiful thing the year brings forth, and this happens to be his daughter Iphigeneia (20–24). There is no mention of her willingness to die; on the contrary, she calls herself wretched (τάλαινα). In her speech (354–71) she categorically condemns the deed of Agamemnon and human sacrifice in general: “It is the men of this land, I believe, being themselves murderers, who lay their own guilt on the gods. No god, I am sure, can be evil” (389–91).<sup>53</sup>

Iphigeneia is priestess of the temple of Artemis, where every Hellene who arrives is to be sacrificed to the goddess. Her task is only to consecrate the victim, the slaughtering is done by others inside the temple. The play ends with the rejection of human sacrifice and its replacement by a substitute (1458–67).

*Iphigeneia in Tauris* as a whole is a plea against human sacrifice.

*The Phoenician Women* (ca. 411–408 BCE)

According to the oracle, Creon must slay (σφάξαι) his son Menoeceus for the sake of his homeland (ὕπὲρ πατράς) (913). As he is not willing to do so (962–85) Menoeceus kills himself: standing on the highest tower of the city he runs his sword through his throat (1090–92), thus dying for the country (ὁ γῆς ὑπερθανών).

Menoceus is in no way the helpless victim of a cruel ceremony (his father does not want to kill him; he himself volunteers to die), and his farewell speech (985–1019) is that of a hero going to die in battle for his homeland, with the only difference that he is not killed by the enemy but by his own hand.

The transformation from victim into hero is complete: Menoeceus, by accepting his fate voluntarily, becomes a hero who dies in order to save the community. Nonetheless, he still remains a human sacrifice expressly claimed by an oracle. And while in the other tragedies the victims, though accepting their fate courageously, suffer because of leaving this world, Menoeceus has no regrets at all.

The death of Menoeceus raises the question where the border lines lie between suicide, sacrifice and heroic death—a question which shall become really important in connection with martyrdom.

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<sup>53</sup> See Hadas and MacLean, trans., *Ten Plays by Euripides*, 251.



Iphigeneia in Aulis (after 406 BCE)

Iphigeneia's story is first told in the *Cypria*, an epic poem written probably in the 7<sup>th</sup> century BCE. The poem itself is not known to us; we possess only two short and relatively late summaries of the Iphigeneia episode. The first of them, based probably on the original text, is preserved by Proclus (5<sup>th</sup> century AD): "When Calchas declared the wrath of the goddess and ordered Iphigeneia to be sacrificed to Artemis, the Greeks summoned her on the pretext of a marriage with Achilles and attempted to sacrifice her. But Artemis snatched her away, transported her to the Taurians and made her immortal; instead of the maiden she substituted a deer at the altar."<sup>54</sup>

The second is found in Apollodorus (1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD). He did not have before him the original text of the *Cypria*, and used instead excerpts or commentaries. The passage concerning Iphigeneia, preserved in an epitome of his work, runs as follows:

Calchas said that they could not sail unless the fairest of Agamemnon's daughters were presented as a sacrifice to Artemis. ... On receipt of this oracle, Agamemnon sent Ulysses and Talthylus to Clytaemnestra and asked for Iphigeneia, alleging a promise of his to give her to Achilles to wife in reward for his military service. So Clytaemnestra sent her, and Agamemnon set her beside the altar, and was about to slaughter her, when Artemis carried her off to the Taurians and appointed her to be her priestess, substituting a deer for her at the altar; but some say that she made her immortal. (*Epitome* 3.16)<sup>55</sup>

Neither of the two texts mentions that Iphigeneia was willing to die, and it is quite probable that according to the *Cypria* this was not the case, contrary to what Bremmer argues: "...it is most likely that Iphigeneia went along of her own accord, as Euripides stresses..."<sup>56</sup> My point is precisely that this "own accord" is an invention of Euripides and appears nowhere before him.

In Aeschylus the sacrifice is anything but voluntary. In the *Agamemnon* the chorus evokes with great expressive force the wild resistance and supplications of Iphigeneia and the cruelty of Agamemnon (228–46). (In Aeschylus she is actually killed; there is no substitute offering.) At any rate Agamemnon is not praised for his deed (compare the chorus's comments:

<sup>54</sup> Quoted by Bremmer, "Sacrificing a Child," 22.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Bremmer, "Sacrificing a Child," 29–30.

220–30) and his death is represented as Clytaemnestra’s vengeance for it (1437–40).<sup>57</sup>

In Euripides the scene changes radically. Just as in the *Cypria*, Iphigeneia is lured to Aulis under the pretext of marrying Achilles. When she discovers the real reason, she is in complete despair and begs her father not to kill her. Later on, however, a radical change takes place in her mind: she not only accepts her fate, but actually wants to die.<sup>58</sup> At this moment she is transformed—not into a martyr, as Bergmann affirms<sup>59</sup>—but into a hero, who saves her homeland through her voluntary death while still remaining what she was: a human sacrifice claimed by the divinity. And this is the point where the story becomes interesting from our point of view.

Let us look at the arguments Iphigeneia uses in order to justify her readiness to die:

- she will die for the homeland (1397); she is happy to do so and forbids her mother to mourn after her (1434–49);
- she will save Hellas (1421; 1473–74);
- she will die a glorious death and her memory will be glorified (1375–98);
- she will live (σέσωσμαι, 1441) and another life is awaiting her (ἔτερον αἰῶνα καὶ μοῖραν οἰκήσομεν, 1506–7).

When led to the altar, she lets nobody touch her and offers her neck voluntarily to the axe.

Iphigeneia argues using patriotic commonplaces which are, in the given situation, totally out of place<sup>60</sup>; there is no need to save Hellas, because nobody threatens it. On the contrary, it is the Greeks who are threatening Troy and, as Clytaemnestra pointed out, the whole campaign is undertaken because of a wanton woman.

<sup>57</sup> Concerning this scene and human sacrifice in Aeschylus in general see Pucci, “Human Sacrifice.” Cf. Bergmann, *In the Shadow of Moloch*, 54–55.

<sup>58</sup> This change is not sufficiently motivated in the drama; on its psychological interpretation see Bergmann, *In the Shadow of Moloch*, 58: [Iphigeneia is] “... a daughter who transformed her profound disappointment in her cruel father into a father – daughter pact of death.”

<sup>59</sup> Bergmann, *In the Shadow of Moloch*, 57.

<sup>60</sup> Just as Agamemnon did before, 1268–73.

There are several motifs which we shall encounter also in martyrology: Iphigeneia dies voluntarily (not simply accepting death, but being happy and proud of it); there is no need to bind or hold her; glory awaits her; and another life is awaiting her.

In the end, however, Iphigeneia does not die. As the priest's knife strikes down, a deer lies on the ground instead of her: Artemis has replaced the girl with a deer (1581–89).<sup>61</sup> The parallel to the *dénouement* of the Aqedah had long been drawn and thoroughly analyzed,<sup>62</sup> thus we do not have to dwell upon it here. We must, however, emphasize that, just as in the case of the Aqedah, this happy ending is irrelevant as to the intentions and motivations of the (human) protagonists. But as well there is an important difference: Agamemnon, contrary to Abraham, was never praised by later tradition for his deed (a deed which, frankly, makes much more sense than that of Abraham).

As we can see, Euripides' interpretation of human sacrifice traverses a very wide range, from voluntary heroic death (Menoeceus) through willingly but not happily accepted self-sacrifice (Macaria, Polyxena, *Iphigeneia in Aulis*), to cruel and senseless slaughter (*Iphigeneia in Tauris*). It is not our task to examine the development of these ideas in Euripides (as we know, *Iphigeneia in Aulis* is his last tragedy, along with the *Bacchantes*); for us, what really counts is the fact that Euripides combined the idea of heroic death and the "comedy of innocence" with human sacrifice. From this time on Greek literary tradition required of the human victim that he or she offer himself/herself willingly. This motif found its way into Jewish and Christian martyrology and into the interpretation of the Aqedah, too.

Three of the four voluntary sacrifices are young high-born girls who, instead of marrying, go proudly into their death. A new type of heroine has been born whom we shall encounter in Christian martyrology. We shall treat this motif in detail in connection with Agnes.

There are, however, other motifs which we shall also discover in the acts and legends of the martyrs: the provocative behavior of the young girl/woman to be killed; her sense of decency even in her last moments; the con-

<sup>61</sup> It is possible that this *deus ex machina* did not belong to the primitive version of the drama in which Iphigeneia actually died just as she did in Aeschylus and in the *Cypria*, cf. Grappe and Marx, *Sacrifice scandaleux*, 124.

<sup>62</sup> Cf. e.g. *ibid.* 51, 124–26.

fusion of the executioner; and the blurring of the boundary between suicide and voluntarily accepted death.

Though the heroes and heroines of Euripides often declare that it is better for them to die than to live, this concerns only their immediate situation and does not mean a rejection of earthly life; on the contrary, they are pained at leaving their family, the light, the world or their wedding day which will never be. We have nothing of the fanatical hatred with which martyrs often turn not only against the world but against their own relatives, too.

### *After Euripides*

After Euripides, as time goes on, there are more and more stories of this kind. The majority of the ancient “mythical” self-sacrifices are found in Pausanias and Plutarch (here we are speaking of voluntary sacrificial death, not heroic death in battle, which, as we have already pointed out, must be distinguished from the former<sup>63</sup>). Therefore the voluntary and even joyful self-sacrifice of the victim is mostly a literary motif, and if there was a “sacrificial ideology” related to human sacrifices, it depended on it.

The situation after Euripides is characterized by Hughes as follows: “Beginning in the fourth century, numerous writers collect obscure local myths and cult practices, and it is to such collections that most of our ‘historical’ human sacrifices, accounts of *pharmakos* rituals, and information about the Locrian maidens can be traced.<sup>64</sup> New stories of human sacrifice began to appear in historical writings. And soon after, human sacrifice becomes a favorite theme of the novelists.”<sup>65</sup> This is quite true and I would only add that we cannot always be sure whether these “obscure local myths” actually existed or were simply invented by the later writers.

We do not know whether in pre-historical times human sacrifice was practiced by the Greeks or not (it is quite possible that it was), but in historical times there is not one single case which could be claimed with certainty

<sup>63</sup> As Versnel himself emphasizes, cf. “Quid Athenis et Hierosolymis,” 183.

<sup>64</sup> Every year two young noble Locrian girls were sent to serve in the temple of Athena at Troy, but if they were caught by the Trojans before reaching the temple they were killed. The myth is first attested in Aeneas ‘the Tactician’ (middle of the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE), cf. Hughes, *Human sacrifice*, 166–84; Schwenn, *Die Menschenopfer*, 47–54. We have not treated this myth because the tribute of the Locrian maidens cannot be considered as a human sacrifice.

<sup>65</sup> Hughes, *Human Sacrifices*, 190.

as authentic. From Euripides onward, however, the subject finds its way into literary works and becomes the more and more popular. In fact, as time goes on, the number of sacrifices committed in the past multiplies spectacularly and it is not by chance that the most complete list of them is found by the philosopher Porphyry (third century AD).<sup>66</sup>

The idea that the human victim has to be willing or even glad to be sacrificed seems to originate with Euripides or at least to have been propagated for the first time by him (it cannot be excluded that it appeared in some early myths, but we have no trace of this), so successfully that later it actually became part of the “sacrificial ideology”—in literature, naturally, not in reality.

Thus, in the era when Christianity was born human sacrifice was a well-known topic in literary works and a number of Christian authors declare that it was practiced even in their own times (which was probably far from being true).

## HUMAN SACRIFICE IN ROME

It is a question of debate whether Roman religion ever required human sacrifice. As we are interested in ideas concerning human sacrifice, not in the facts themselves, we shall take no stand in this question, neither shall we investigate whether certain rites (*Ver sacrum*,<sup>67</sup> *Argei*<sup>68</sup>) are survivals of human sacrifices or not. Instead, we shall merely give a brief overview of cases known from literature, whether historical or mythical.

In extreme situations the Sibyllian oracles could order the immolation of human victims. Thus in 226 BCE a Greek woman and man as well as a Gaulish woman and man were buried alive to save Rome from destruction, and in 216 the same happened again during a critical period of the Second Punic war in order to expiate a *prodigium* (a Vestal virgin had lost her virginity).<sup>69</sup> According to Plutarch a similar sacrifice took place a third time

<sup>66</sup> Porphyry, *De abstinentia* 2.53.3–56.10, quoted by Hughes, *Human Sacrifice*, 123–24.

<sup>67</sup> Cf. Futrell, *Blood in the Arena*, 188–89.

<sup>68</sup> Cf. Futrell, *Blood in the Arena*, 184–88.

<sup>69</sup> In 226 Rome was threatened by the Greeks and the Gauls, thus it was natural that the victims should belong to these nations. In 216, however, this had lost its original meaning. For both cases see in detail Schwenn, *Die Menschenopfer*, 148–49, with the relevant passages from classical writers.

in 114 BCE, but this information does not seem very reliable. Pliny<sup>70</sup> and Plutarch affirm that this ritual was practiced even in their time,<sup>71</sup> and Minucius Felix also knows about it.<sup>72</sup>

According to several Christian writers a man was sacrificed on the festival of Jupiter Latiaris to the god.<sup>73</sup>

In Marseille in times of plague one of the poor who volunteered was fed a whole year at the city's expense, and when the year was over he was ornamented and loaded with all the evil of the city, and then tossed into the sea.<sup>74</sup> Here we are clearly dealing with a *pharmakos* ritual, which is probably of Greek origin.<sup>75</sup>

From later times several cases of ritual slaughter are known, but it is not evident whether they can be considered as human sacrifices.<sup>76</sup> As Futrell emphasizes, in a non-secular society no clear distinction can be made between execution and sacrifice, because every crime is also an affront against the gods. "Capital punishment, as the expiatory sacrifice of the criminal, deflected the rage of the gods from the community and restored the *pax deorum*."<sup>77</sup> The criminal condemned to death becomes *sacer*.<sup>78</sup> Perhaps we can say that execution means the punishment of a sin (the sinner himself is put to death), whereas the victims of human sacrifices are innocent persons.

<sup>70</sup> Pliny, *Historia Naturalis* 28.12, quoted by Schwenn, *Die Menschenopfer*, 149, n. 2.

<sup>71</sup> According to Plutarch, *Marcellus* 3, every November, quoted by Schwenn, *Die Menschenopfer*, 148, n. 1.

<sup>72</sup> Minucius Felix, *Octavius* 30.4, quoted by Schwenn, *Die Menschenopfer*, 149, n. 4. Concerning these sacrifices see Futrell, *Blood in the Arena*, 197–203.

<sup>73</sup> Minucius Felix, *Octavius* 30.4; Tatian, *Ad Graecos* 129; Tertullian, *Apologeticus* 9; cf. Futrell, *Blood in the Arena*, 189, 301, n. 92. See also Schwenn, *Die Menschenopfer*, 180, n. 1, cf. Wünsch, "Human Sacrifice (Roman)," 858. According to Latte this cannot be true, see Latte, *Römische Religionsgeschichte*, 144 (cf. *Der Kleine Pauly* 2, 537–38); similarly Schwenn, *Die Menschenopfer*, 181.

<sup>74</sup> Petronius in Servius commentarius in Vergilii *Aeneida* 3.57, cf. Schwenn, *Die Menschenopfer*, 43.

<sup>75</sup> Cf. above 36–38. We shall return to this ritual in ch. 5 in connection with the martyrdom of Dasius.

<sup>76</sup> Cf. Wünsch, "Human Sacrifice," 861, who lists all of them under the title of "sacrifice." I omit several of his examples which I do not consider as true sacrifices.

<sup>77</sup> Futrell, *Blood in the Arena*, 189.

<sup>78</sup> Festus 318M (467Th): "... homo sacer is est quem populus iudicavit ob maleficium"; cf. Futrell, *Blood in the Arena*, 190, 301, n. 96.

In the majority of cases this distinction can be useful, but not always, as we have seen concerning the *pharmakos* ritual.

The same is true for our next example. In 46 BCE Caesar punished two mutinous soldiers by delivering them to the priests who slaughtered them in the same way as horses were offered to Mars. Thus their deaths seem to be at the same time a punishment for their mutiny and an expiatory sacrifice to Mars.<sup>79</sup>

In 41 BCE Octavian, after conquering Perusia, allegedly slaughtered 300 of its citizens on the altar of his stepfather, Julius Caesar, which was, on the one hand, an act of vengeance against the city for having defended Caesar's murderers, but on the other a sacrifice to the dead relative.<sup>80</sup>

According to Dio Cassius Sextus Pompeius, who considered himself the son of Poseidon, threw horses "and as some say, even men" alive into the sea,<sup>81</sup> evidently as sacrifices to Poseidon out of gratitude to the god for having saved him and his army in a storm (38 BCE).

In Vergil Aeneas offers human beings during the burial of Pallas (*Aeneid* 11.81–82), the model being probably not only Achilles but also the aforementioned act of Octavian.<sup>82</sup>

Commodus sacrificed a man to Mithras,<sup>83</sup> and several cases are mentioned by classical authors where human beings, mostly children, were killed for magical purposes.<sup>84</sup>

Two late Christian sources, the *Acta Dasii* and the *Acta Caesarii*, tell of human sacrifices to Saturn and Apollo respectively; these we shall treat later in some detail in connection with martyrdom.<sup>85</sup>

In 97 BCE the senate prohibited human sacrifices and the prohibition was reiterated a number of times during the next centuries (which means that

<sup>79</sup> Dio Cassius 43.24.4: ἐν τρόπῳ τινὶ ἱερουργίας ἐσφάγησαν, cf. Schwenn, *Die Menschenopfer*, 166–67. Futrell thinks rather that Dio mistakenly interpreted a simple military execution as some kind of ritual killing, *Blood in the Arena*, 195.

<sup>80</sup> Suetonius, *Augustus* 15: "Scribunt quidam trecentos ex dediticiis electos utriusque ordinis ad aram Divo Iulio exstructam Idibus Martis hostiarum more mactatos"; Dio Cassius 48.14.4, cf. Schwenn, *Die Menschenopfer*, 182. Some other sources diminish the guilt of Octavian, cf. Futrell, *Blood in the Arena*, 196–97.

<sup>81</sup> 48.48.5, cf. Schwenn, *Die Menschenopfer*, 182.

<sup>82</sup> Schwenn, *Die Menschenopfer*, 173; Wunsch, "Human Sacrifice," 861.

<sup>83</sup> *Historia Augusta Vita Commodi* 9.

<sup>84</sup> Cf. Wunsch, "Human Sacrifice," 861.

<sup>85</sup> See ch. 5.

it was still being practiced), and finally the prohibition was incorporated in the *corpus iuris*.<sup>86</sup>

### *Voluntary sacrifice*

The sacrifices we have reviewed so far were everything but voluntary; the victims were mostly captives or criminals and they can hardly be considered as heroes. We have, however, examples from Roman history and/or mythology where someone, and this time a noble (or the noblest) person, sacrifices himself for the community.

Clearly mythical is the story of Curtius: the earth has opened in the middle of the Forum and haruspices declare that it will be closed only when the most valuable possession of the state (or, according to another variant, the strongest of the citizens) is thrown into it. Curtius plunged into it on horseback in full armor, and the chasm immediately closed.<sup>87</sup>

But the most famous cases of self-sacrifice (“one for many”) are the *devotio*’s of the Decii. According to Hengel, “in the archaic *devotio* the general dedicated himself or others to the gods of the underworld with the aim of also delivering his opponents over to the underworld by means of his own sacrificial death.”<sup>88</sup>

In the year 340 BCE<sup>89</sup> before joining battle against the Latins the two generals of the Roman army, P. Decius Mus and T. Manlius Torquatus, had the same dream: the gods of the underworld and Mother Earth required from one of the parties the army, and from the other the leader. And victory will belong to the army the leader of which offers as a sacrifice the legions of the enemy and in addition himself.<sup>90</sup> The generals agree that the one whose troops retreat first will be the one to sacrifice himself. When the troops of

<sup>86</sup> Cf. Schwenn, *Die Menschenopfer*, 186–87; Wünsch, “Human Sacrifice,” 861.

<sup>87</sup> Different versions of the story are known, see Versnel, “Self-sacrifice,” 142; Schwenn, *Die Menschenopfer*, 178–79.

<sup>88</sup> Hengel, *Atonement*, 14–15.

<sup>89</sup> For a detailed description of the *devotio* of P. Decius Mus see Livy 8.6–9, other passages in Schwenn, *Die Menschenopfer*, 155–56. Livy gives the date of this event as 225 BCE, evidently an error. See also the fundamental study: Versnel, “Self-sacrifice.”

<sup>90</sup> Livy 8.6.10: “...ex una acie imperatorem, ex altera exercitum deis manibus matrique Terrae deberi. utrius exercitus imperator legiones hostium superque eas se devovisset, eius populi partisue victoriam fore”; Livy in thirteen volumes IV: Books VIII–X, trans. Foster, 20.



Decius are losing ground he fulfils the rite of *devotio* following the instructions of the *pontifex maximus*. Covering his head with the *toga praetexta* he invokes the gods and pronounces the prescribed formula:

*sicut verbis nuncupavi ita pro re publica populi Romani Quiritium, exercitu, legionibus, auxiliis populi Romani Quiritium legiones auxiliaque hostium mecum deis Manibus Tellurique devoveo* (As I have pronounced the words, even so on behalf of the republic of the Roman People of the Quirites, and of the army, the legions, and the auxiliaries of the Roman People and the Quirites, do I devote the legions and auxiliaries of the enemy, together with myself, to the divine Manes and to Earth).<sup>91</sup>

Then he mounts his horse and rides into the midst of the enemy where he meets his death. His *devotio* was successful, and the enemy was defeated.

Similarly, according to Livy, the son of Decius, likewise named P. Decius Mus, performed the act of *devotio* in 295 BCE during the battle of Sentium. “*Iam ego mecum hostium legiones mactandas Telluri ac dis Manibus dabo* (Now I will offer up the legions of the enemy, to be slain with myself as victims to Earth and the Manes),”<sup>92</sup> he says, then consecrates himself with the same words as his father.

His son, also named P. Decius Mus, allegedly fulfilled or wanted to fulfil a *devotio* in 279 BCE at Ausculum in the battle against Pyrrhus.<sup>93</sup> Of the three cases of *devotio* the first may be historical, while the two others are probably legendary.

Apart from the Decii only one other example is known which can be interpreted as a *devotio*: in 390 BCE during the invasion of the Gauls everybody fled; only the Curiales awaited the enemy in their official attire, and let themselves be killed without offering resistance.<sup>94</sup>

<sup>91</sup> Livy 8.9.8; text and translation: Livy in thirteen volumes IV, trans. Foster, 36–37.

<sup>92</sup> 10.28.13; cf. Livy in thirteen volumes IV, trans. Foster, 466–67.

<sup>93</sup> The reports diverge as to what happened, cf. *Der Kleine Pauly* 1, 1411. Livy does not mention his case.

<sup>94</sup> Livy adds: “*Sunt qui M. Folio pontifice maximo praefante carmen devovisse eos se pro patria Quiritibusque Romanis tradant*” (5.41.2–3); for other places see Schwenn, *Die Menschenopfer*, 159, n. 3.

To summarize, based on what we know about human sacrifice in Rome we can state the following:

- human sacrifices were well-known to the Romans, as it is shown by the prohibitions against it;
- the victims are often captives or those who had committed some sin; in the case of the latter their immolation amounts to the infliction of a death penalty, considered as a sacrifice;
- several cases of self-sacrifice are known where someone, always a noble person, gives his life in order to save the many (“*unus pro omnibus*”);
- just as with the Greeks, as time goes on the number of human sacrifices multiply (at least in literature).

The attitude of the Romans to human sacrifice is excellently characterized by Futrell: “The sources are willing to consign human sacrifice to the religious calendar of the distant past, a distancing device if ever there was one. There may be a self-congratulatory element in this, as Romans are depicted as having learned the ways of ‘civilized’ Mediterraneans long, long ago. This is an image common to European West, where only primitive forebears and Other People offer up human sacrifices.”<sup>95</sup>

Especially interesting is the interpretation Pliny gives of the prohibition pronounced by the senate against human sacrifice in 97 BCE: “...in the year 657<sup>th</sup> of the city, when ... a senatorial decree was passed that no human shall be sacrificed, at that time unnatural rites were celebrated openly ... nor could anyone ever be able to estimate how much is owed to those Romans who lifted these performances, in which to kill a man was considered extremely religious, and even to eat him was considered as very wholesome.”<sup>96</sup>

Romans are depicted in this text as culture heroes, and we shall discover with some surprise that some three centuries later Eusebius attributes the same achievement to the Christians.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Futrell, *Blood in the Arena*, 190.

<sup>96</sup> Pliny, *Historia naturalis* 30.12, quoted by Futrell, *Blood in the Arena*, 204.

<sup>97</sup> See below, 198–99.

## HUMAN SACRIFICE IN CARTHAGE

Classical Greek and Roman as well as Christian authors knew of many other varieties of human sacrifices, practiced by various nations.<sup>98</sup> According to Herodotus, the Tauri sacrifice shipwrecked sailors to ‘the Virgin’ (4.103.1–2), the Scythians sacrifice prisoners of war to Ares (4.62.3–4), and the Massegetae kill and consume those who are growing old (1.216.2–3);<sup>99</sup> Clement of Alexandria also mentions the Tauri (*Protepticus* 3.42);<sup>100</sup> Porphyry<sup>101</sup> and Lactantius<sup>102</sup> likewise know of a number of cases. The story of the gymnosophists of India who threw themselves into the fire was well known.<sup>103</sup>

The most important cases, however, mentioned equally by pagan and Christian sources, are without doubt the Phoenician and Carthaginian human sacrifices.<sup>104</sup> As the sacrificial practice of Carthage probably had a strong impact on the formation of North African martyrology (Perpetua and Felicity, Tertullian’s ideas about martyrdom, and later, the Donatist martyrs), and through it, on Western theology in general,<sup>105</sup> we must treat it in some detail.

In a fragment preserved by Eusebius, Philo of Byblos records, quoting the historical work of Sanchuniathon (who lived around 1000<sup>106</sup> BCE) that

<sup>98</sup> As we stated in the Introduction, we are not interested in human sacrifice in general, but only in those aspects which could have influenced Christian martyrology.

<sup>99</sup> Cf. Hughes, *Human Sacrifice*, 8.

<sup>100</sup> Cf. Hughes, *Human Sacrifice*, 119.

<sup>101</sup> Porphyry, *De abstinencia* 2.53.3–56.10, cf. Hughes, *Human Sacrifice*, 123–24.

<sup>102</sup> Lactantius, *Divinae Institutiones* 1.21, cf. Hughes, *Human Sacrifice*, 119.

<sup>103</sup> Lucian, *Death of Peregrinus* 25.39. The starting point of this myth was the story of Kalanos, which we shall treat below in connection with the paradigm “defying the tyrant.”

<sup>104</sup> See on this topic Aubet, *The Phoenicians and the West*, 246–54; Salisbury, *Perpetua’s Passion*, 49–57.

<sup>105</sup> Baslez also supposes a connection between the image of the martyr as conceived by the Christians of North Africa and the human sacrifices practiced in this region, see Baslez, *Les persécutions dans l’Antiquité*, 194; cf. Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church*, 267. As to the connection of the *Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas* with Carthaginian sacrificial practice see Salisbury, *Perpetua’s Passion*. We shall return to this question below.

<sup>106</sup> Cf. Hughes, *Human Sacrifice*, 119. According to “Sanchuniathon,” in *Der Kleine Pauly* 4, 1539, he lived probably in the 9<sup>th</sup> century BCE. The historical reality of this person is generally accepted.

the Phoenician princes in cases of great distress sacrificed their most beloved sons to Kronos/Saturn, whom they called El:

It was a custom of the ancients in great crises of dangers for the rulers of a city or nation, in order to avert the common ruin, to give up the most beloved of their children for sacrifice (εἰς σφαγὴν) as a ransom to the avenging daemons (λύτρον τοῖς τιμωροῖς δαίμοσιν); and those who were thus given up were sacrificed with mystic rites. Kronos then, whom the Phoenicians call Elus, who was king in the country and subsequently, after his decease, was deified as the star Saturn, had by a nymph of the country named Anobret an only begotten son, whom they on this account called Iedoud, the only begotten being still so called by the Phoenicians; and when great danger from war beset the country, he arrayed his son in royal apparel, and prepared an altar, and sacrificed him.<sup>107</sup>

According to classical authors, child sacrifices were widely practiced in Carthage.<sup>108</sup> This is supported by the results of archaeology: the so called ‘tophet,’ a cemetery in Carthage used between 750 and 146 BCE (the fall of Carthage), contained more than 20.000 cinerary urns with the remains of small children and at times also of animals. The majority of the urns were deposited between 400 and 200 when Carthage was at the height of its power.<sup>109</sup> Child sacrifice was probably practiced individually and collectively also.<sup>110</sup> It cannot be determined whether or not there was regular child sacrifice, too, as some ancient authors affirm.<sup>111</sup>

The sacrifice, it seems, was efficacious only when it was offered “voluntarily,” that is, neither the parents nor the children were permitted to cry, and the parents did their best to prevent their little ones from doing so.<sup>112</sup> Tertul-

<sup>107</sup> Eusebius, *Praeparatio Evangelica* 1.10.44; English text: Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection*, 26. Bremmer, “Myth and Ritual in Greek Human Sacrifice,” 58, n. 18, gives numerous examples of human sacrifice among the Phoenicians.

<sup>108</sup> See also Futrell, *Blood in the Arena*, 175–77, with important bibliographic references in the notes, 295–97.

<sup>109</sup> Concerning the archaeological evidence see Aubet, *The Phoenicians*, 250–54.

<sup>110</sup> Plutarch reports that those who had no children bought the children of poor parents and offered them as if they were lambs, *De Superstitione* 171C.

<sup>111</sup> Clitarchus, Porphyry, Tertullian, Diodorus and Plutarch, see Aubet, *The Phoenicians*, 249.

<sup>112</sup> See to this Salisbury, *Perpetua's Passion*, 51.

lian<sup>113</sup> and Minucius Felix<sup>114</sup> both describe how parents embraced their children so that they should not cry. We learn from Plutarch that if the mother showed any sign of sorrow the sacrifice lost its value, but was performed nonetheless.<sup>115</sup>

The most famous collective sacrifice took place in 310 BCE when Carthage was besieged by Agathocles of Syracuse. The inhabitants of the city were convinced that Kronos/Baal had turned against them because they had neglected the ancient laws and instead of offering the noblest children to the god they secretly bought poor children to offer them as sacrifice. To remedy this, two hundred noble children of the city were publicly sacrificed, and three hundred more, evidently adult, persons offered themselves voluntarily as well.<sup>116</sup>

Some other cases of child sacrifice in extreme danger are also recorded.<sup>117</sup> All the known human sacrifices in Carthage came from the ruling class.

According to Tertullian, child sacrifices to Saturn were practiced even in his time.<sup>118</sup> As Frend states: "In such an environment [i.e. the cult of Saturn], martyrdom, as indicating the individual's sacrifice of himself in order to appease an implacable Deity, becomes readily intelligible."<sup>119</sup>

## NOBLE DEATH

### *Greece and Rome*

First of all we shall briefly present the views found in three different works concerning noble death, or "dying for the truth."

Seeley's starting point is the description of the death of the Maccabean martyrs in *4 Macc.* and the interpretation of Jesus' death by Paul. He distinguishes the following five components which are common to both:

<sup>113</sup> Tertullian, *Apologeticus* 9.4

<sup>114</sup> Minucius Felix, *Octavius* 30.3

<sup>115</sup> Plutarch, *De superstitione* 171C.

<sup>116</sup> Diodorus Siculus 20.14.4–5; cf. Lactantius, *Divinae Institutiones* 1.21. Archaeologists have found no evidence of such mass sacrifices.

<sup>117</sup> Aubet, *The Phoenicians*, 249, though the informations she presents should be treated with some caution. Some sources are cited erroneously (Justin 13.7—correctly 18.7) and the interpretation of the sources is also somewhat questionable (the killing of Malchus' son has nothing to do with sacrifice).

<sup>118</sup> Tertullian, *Apologeticus* 9.3.

<sup>119</sup> Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution*, 267.

- obedience (to philosophy);
- the overcoming of physical vulnerability;
- a military setting;
- vicariousness—being beneficial for others;
- sacrificial metaphors.<sup>120</sup>

He subsequently discovers the same components in the reports of Hellenistic and Roman authors about the “noble death of the philosopher.” In any case, as Seeley remarks, sacrificial metaphors are the least important of the five and in several cases they are missing.<sup>121</sup>

He examines such descriptions as Seneca on Cato, Scipio and Regulus; Epictetus (ca. 55–135 AD) on Diogenes; Silius Italicus (26–101 AD) on Regulus; Plutarch (after 45 – after 120 AD) on Socrates; Tacitus on Thræsea and Seneca; and Lucian on Demonax. He comes to the conclusion that “the Noble Death has been exhibited and utilized by a broad spectrum of Greco-Roman writers around the time of the NT.”<sup>122</sup>

Let us now examine briefly one by one why and how the above-mentioned persons were compelled to die.

- Socrates was condemned to drink hemlock for remaining faithful to his convictions.
- Cato, defeated by Caesar, killed himself with his sword instead of surrendering (46 BCE).
- P. Scipio, the adoptive son of Metellus Pius, likewise killed himself with his sword when in 52 BCE his ship fell into Caesar’s hands.
- The consul Regulus, captured by the Carthagians, was sent back to Rome in 250 BCE in order to negotiate favorable peace conditions for Carthage. After having done just the contrary, he returned to Carthage to face torture and death.<sup>123</sup>
- Diogenes, the Cynic philosopher, killed himself at the age of 90 (or 81) by holding back his breath (or by starving himself to death), apparently

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<sup>120</sup> Seeley, *The Noble Death*, 13.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, 134.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 141.

<sup>123</sup> Ancient authors are unanimous as to his Carthaginian captivity, but opinions concerning his further fate diverge, cf. “Regulus,” in *Der Kleine Pauly* 4, 1368–69.

because he was no longer able to continue living according to Cynic ideals.<sup>124</sup>

- Thrasea, a senator, was forced to commit suicide under Nero in 66 AD, just as Seneca was in 65 AD. The latter cut his veins, but as this was not enough to kill him, he finally ended his life by drinking hemlock (in imitation of Socrates, of course).
- Demonax is an otherwise unknown Cynic philosopher of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD who appears in Lucian: he starved himself to death at the age of 100, because he was unable to continue living in the right way.<sup>125</sup>

For Drodge and Tabor<sup>126</sup> noble death is a variety of voluntary death, mostly in the form of suicide, representing the freedom to choose death when it is no longer possible to live in the proper way, or to put it succinctly: the right to die with dignity. Naturally a suicide can be called noble death only if committed for a noble reason. The decision whether one has to live or to die is always a subjective one: in the same situation Cato *had* to commit suicide in order to remain faithful to himself, while other persons could have continue living.<sup>127</sup>

Drodge and Tabor cite the following examples of noble death: Socrates; Achilles, who chooses to avenge Patroclus and to win great glory even at the cost of his life; Ajax, who commits suicide because he is unable to bear his shame; Diogenes; Demonax; the two Stoic philosophers, Zeno and Cleanthes, who allegedly killed themselves when they felt that they would no longer be able to live in the right way<sup>128</sup>; Cato; Seneca who intends his suicide (which was far from being voluntary) as an example for others.

Seeley, as well as Drodge and Tabor, distinguished noble death from the paradigm we have called “heroic death for the homeland.” Hengel’s approach is somewhat different; he examines cases where someone is willing to die

<sup>124</sup> A great number of legends circulated about Diogenes, and this may be one of them; it exists in several versions.

<sup>125</sup> Lucian, *Demonax* 65–66.

<sup>126</sup> Drodge and Tabor, *A Noble Death*.

<sup>127</sup> Cicero, *De officiis* 1.31, quoted by Drodge and Tabor, *A Noble Death*, 33.

<sup>128</sup> According to the Stoics a person should continue to live as long as his life contains a “preponderance of things in accordance with nature,” Cicero, *De finibus bonorum et malorum* 3.18, quoted by Drodge and Tabor, *A Noble Death*, 30. The same opinion is attributed by Plutarch expressly to Chrysippus, see *De Stoicorum repugnantiis* 1042d.

for something/someone else: either for the city and his friends, or for law and truth.<sup>129</sup> According to Hengel, “Voluntary death for the common good of one’s city or one’s friends could also be transferred to spiritual ends,”<sup>130</sup> such as the law or the truth.

Whereas “dying for the law” can be effectively the spiritualization of “dying for the city,” since it happens for the sake of the community, “dying for the truth” belongs to quite another category. It does not happen for the good of the community but because of personal convictions and should therefore be ranged under the rubric of “noble death.”

Hengel mentions only three philosophers who died or were ready to die for the truth: Socrates, Hermias and Apollonius of Tyana.

- Hermias, a friend of Aristotle, was captured and executed by Artaxerxes III for treason, and if he deserves any praise at all it is only for his courageous behavior during his execution (he was crucified). It is questionable whether his case has anything to do with the paradigm of “dying for something/someone else.”
- The story of Apollonius, as told by Philostratus, is interesting: he is obliged to appear before Domitian, which could easily lead to his condemnation and execution (though he knows all the while that this will not happen). Discussing the situation beforehand with his pupils he points out that it is quite natural to die for the city, family, and friends; everybody should be prepared to do so: “Let a wise man die for the causes you spoke of, and let even an unwise one do so too, since dying for freedom’s sake is a duty prescribed by law, whereas doing so for family, friends or lovers is determined by nature. Everyone is subject to nature and law, to nature by choice, but to law by compulsion. But for the wise it is more proper to die on behalf of their beliefs (ὕπὲρ ὧν ἐπετήδευσαν).” (*The Life of Apollonius of Tyana* 7.14)<sup>131</sup> As we can see, Apollonius (or rather Philostratus) distinguishes dying for the law, or for friends and family, on the one hand, which is the duty of everyone, and dying for one’s beliefs, on the other hand, which is proper only to “wise men,” in other words, philosophers. “Belief” does

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<sup>129</sup> Hengel, *Atonement*, 15.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

<sup>131</sup> Philostratus, *The Life of Apollonius of Tyana* 2, trans. Jones, 239.



not mean religious belief, but rather ‘conviction’, the way of life considered as right.

Many other (real or legendary) cases of noble death are known,<sup>132</sup> two of which are of special interest: Antigone, who dies because the obligation to bury her brother is more important to her than her life, and Lucretia, who after having been violated commits suicide.<sup>133</sup>

### *Carthage*

Several cases from Carthaginian history are recorded when someone (always a noble person in leading position) killed himself/herself in a situation which had become unbearable for him/her. Elissa (known also as Dido), the founder of Carthage (ca. 800 BCE), chose death over marriage to a local chieftain: she prepared a pyre as if intending to offer a sacrifice to her deceased husband before marrying again, then stepped into the fire and killed herself with a sword<sup>134</sup>; the general Hamilcar, while fighting in Sicily (in 485 BCE), when he saw defeat facing his troops, threw himself into the pyre on which he had just been offering sacrifices<sup>135</sup>; at the end of the third Punic war, when Carthage was already burning, the wife of the general Hasdrubal, after reproaching her husband for his cowardice and calling him a traitor, slew their children and threw them, along with herself, into the fire<sup>136</sup>; and so on.

Salisbury calls these acts self-sacrifices or sacrificial suicides,<sup>137</sup> but in fact they have no sacrificial character. The victim does not offer himself/herself to any divinity, he or she does not seek to obtain anything in return for his/her deed (he or she chooses death in order to avoid shame or humiliation), neither has the community any benefit from it. This kind of death belongs to the category of “noble death” rather than sacrifice. Nonetheless these cases could have served the Carthaginian Christians as examples and

<sup>132</sup> Cf. Barton, “Honor and Sacredness,” 24.

<sup>133</sup> See her story in Livy 1.57.6 – 59.6.

<sup>134</sup> Justin, *Epitome* 18.6; cf. Salisbury, *Perpetua's Passion*, 34. Tertullian also knows of it, see *Ad Martyras* 4.5. In Vergil she dies for love of Aeneas.

<sup>135</sup> Herodotus 7.165–67.

<sup>136</sup> Appian, *Historia Romana* 8.131; cf. Tertullian, *Ad Martyras* 4.5.

<sup>137</sup> Salisbury, *Perpetua's Passion*, 53.

they actually did serve as such: thus Tertullian in his *Ad Martyras*<sup>138</sup> evoked them for his Christian readers in an effort to spur them to martyrdom.

### *Defying the tyrant*

In the aforementioned examples we note that noble death often happens because a philosopher is not willing to renounce his convictions when confronting an earthly ruler, or a statesmen/general/soldier to submit to his military or political opponent. These instances, which we shall call “defying the tyrant,” constitute a sub-category of “noble death.” The hero does not brave the tyrant only in deed but also with words: before dying he sets forth the reasons for his action and makes clear that all the efforts of the tyrant are in vain and of no effect. “Defying the tyrant” can also lead to suicide when someone, instead of waiting to be killed by his foe, kills himself beforehand instead. As examples we could cite Cato, or Vulteius and his soldiers who, according to Lucan, killed each other so as not to fall in the hands of Caesar’s troops.<sup>139</sup>

The story of Kalanos, told by eight different authors, was especially popular. According to the simpler version, which probably corresponds fairly well to what really happened, Kalanos, a famous brahmin, accompanied Alexander the Great to Persia, and when he became ill he organized, with Alexander’s help, a solemn ceremony during which he freely stepped on the pyre and died in the flames.<sup>140</sup> Another variant, however, presents the events in a totally different light. According to Philo of Alexandria Alexander wanted to take Kalanos with him on the journey in order to win high fame in Asia and Europe. Kalanos refuses, declaring:

“What shall I be worth to you, Alexander, for exhibiting to the Greeks if I am compelled to do what I do not wish to do?” On top of this, he sends a letter to Alexander in which he categorically refuses to obey the whims of the king: “... Your friends urge you to apply violence and compulsion to the philosophers of India. These friends, however, have never even in their dreams seen what we do. Bodies you will transport from place to

<sup>138</sup> Ch. 4.

<sup>139</sup> Lucan, *Bellum Civile* 4.447 sqq. See the story in Barton, “Honor and Sacredness,” 25–26.

<sup>140</sup> Strabo 15.717; Diodorus 17.107. For all the sources see Hadas, *Hellenistic Culture: Fusion and Diffusion*, 306, n. 11.

place, but souls you will not compel to do what they will not, any more than force bricks or sticks to talk. Fire causes the greatest trouble and ruin to living bodies: we are superior to this, we burn ourselves alive. There is no king, no ruler, who will compel us to do what we do not freely wish to do. ...” (*That every good man is free* 14 [96])<sup>141</sup>

Resistance to the tyrant’s command is the central topic of 2 Macc and 4 Macc. and is a recurrent motif of the acts of the martyrs. The martyr’s line of argument before the tribunal often shows similarities to that of Kalanos as conceived by Philo.

### Conclusions

Let us now return to the question of what we mean by noble death and what its characteristic features are. We generally speak of the “noble death of the philosopher,” and indeed, in the majority of cases, those who choose this way of ending their life are philosophers or at least politicians or generals imbued with philosophical culture. But not always: Achilles, Ajax, Antigone and Lucretia, or the Carthaginian generals cannot be termed philosophers. As we have stated before, we speak of noble death when someone dies for his beliefs, his convictions, for the ideal of the life he has pursued.

Now we have to examine somewhat more closely for what ideals or codes of life the aforementioned persons died (whether in reality or only in legend, it is of no concern to us): was it for individual, subjective ideas or rather for universally accepted, objective codes? There is no unequivocal answer to this question. Some of our heroes died for universal values such as *pietas* (Antigone) or honor. The second of these, though of outmost importance in ancient Greece and Rome may not have had the same meaning for every member of these societies. Different persons and different groups could have different codes of honor. Achilles and Ajax could not have remained what they were (i.e. Greek heroes) if they had continued living while leaving their friend unavenged (Achilles) or enduring shame (Ajax), whereas probably many other persons could have done this without any problem. The same may be true for Lucretia: a high born Roman woman who has lost her honor could regain it only through self-destruction. This code of honor was so deeply rooted that even in the time of Augustine Roman women acted in

<sup>141</sup> English trans.: Philo vol. 9, ed. and trans. Colson, 65.

accordance with it.<sup>142</sup> We must not presume, however, that the same norms were applied in all social or philosophical groups in Roman society. Philosophers died because of the codes of living of their respective philosophical schools, and these codes varied from school to school.

Even if there are some general, objective norms (valid for the whole society or perhaps only for certain groups) the decisive factor is individual sensibility. No objective norm compelled Cato to commit suicide; he was driven to die because of his personal code, for as Cicero points out: "Diversity of character carries with it so great significance that death may be for one man a duty, for another under the same circumstances not a duty." (*On duties* 1.112)<sup>143</sup> The case of Socrates is quite particular: he is compelled to die because his personal code opposes him to the norms of the society he is living in. Among all the examples we have surveyed he is the only one whose death was due (at least partially) to religious reasons: his way of life was commanded to him by the divinity and therefore he was accused by his opponents of neglecting the traditional gods. As Antigone dies for respecting the universal law of piety toward the dead, we cannot in her case really speak of religious motivation. Epictetus states that Diogenes was ready to die for his ancestors, the gods and his real Country, the Universe<sup>144</sup>; but, as we have seen, he died ultimately (at least according to one legend) because he was unable to continue his proper way of life. Consequently, we can conclude that religious motives in general are of very little importance in choosing noble death.

Noble death often involves suicide, but not necessarily. At all events, it implies that the person has the choice of living or dying, but he chooses death because to continue living would be possible only at the price of violating or abandoning his principles. This is practically its only reason; sometimes (not very often) glory is mentioned as a secondary reason, but the hope for a life after death does not appear. It neither happens for the sake of the community, nor in order to please the divinity. Even if someone dies for generally or widely accepted norms, such as for the Roman honor, his decision is a subjective one: many other persons in the same situation would have continued living without scruple, as they indeed did. We have to realize that

<sup>142</sup> Augustine, *De civitate Dei* 1.16–17; cf. Drodge and Tabor, *A Noble Death*, 173.

<sup>143</sup> Cf. Drodge and Tabor, *A Noble Death*, 33.

<sup>144</sup> Epictetus 4.1.152–55, quoted by Seeley, *Noble Death*, 124.

the cases treated above constituted the exceptions, which is the reason why we remember them.

Pain and suffering in themselves have no value; the aim is to die, not to suffer. It is even possible to choose noble death in order to avoid some unbearable suffering such as “intolerable pain, mutilation, or incurable disease.”<sup>145</sup> But in some cases, when death was not easily achieved, suffering made it even more “noble.” The following sentence sounds almost as if it were taken from the acts of a martyr: “Surely the gods looked with pleasure upon their pupil [*alumni suum*] as he made his escape by so glorious and memorable an end.”<sup>146</sup> In fact, it was written by Seneca and refers to Cato, who thrust his sword through his body and when the physician tried to bind the wound up, tore the bandages off. The same Seneca declares concerning Regulus who was tortured to death by the Carthaginians: “But the greater his torture is, the greater shall be his glory.”<sup>147</sup>

Finally, returning to the five characteristics of noble death proposed by Seeley we can make the following assessments:

- Obedience to philosophy is the determining factor, though it would be better to speak of “obedience to one’s convictions” (see Achilles and Ajax).
- The overcoming of physical vulnerability is naturally important, but it means primarily accepting death, and not suffering or torture (though we have seen cases where death happens in a very painful manner).
- A military setting is not really important; sometimes it is present, sometimes not, and often only as a metaphor.
- As to vicariousness, noble death never happens for the sake of others, nonetheless it can be beneficial as an example.
- Sacrificial metaphors (as Seeley himself remarks) appear only seldom, and if they do, they are nothing more than metaphors. “We are making a libation to Jove the Liberator,” says Thrasea in Tacitus<sup>148</sup>; sim-

<sup>145</sup> According to the Stoics’ opinion as reported by Diogenes Laertius 7.130, quoted by Drodge and Tabor, *A Noble Death*, 30.

<sup>146</sup> Seneca, *De providentia* 2.12, quoted by Drodge and Tabor, *A Noble Death*, 35.

<sup>147</sup> Seneca, *De providentia* 3.9 quoted by Seeley, *Noble Death*, 119.

<sup>148</sup> Tacitus, *Annales* 16.35 quoted by Seeley, *The Noble Death*, 135.

ilarly Tacitus writes about the death of Seneca: “In the last resort, he entered a vessel of heated water, sprinkling some on the slaves nearest, with the remark that he offered the liquid as a drink-offering to Jove the Liberator.”<sup>149</sup> In these cases it is not the philosopher himself who is the sacrifice, rather he offers a sacrifice for his liberation, just as Socrates did when he ordered a cock to be offered to Asclepius. Lucian’s *Demonax*, however, considers himself in reality as a sacrifice: “Men of Athens,” he says at the beginning of his speech to the Athenians, “you see me ready with my garland: come, sacrifice me like your former victim, for on that occasion your offering found no favor with the gods!”<sup>150</sup> The “former victim” is an allusion to Socrates whose death is also represented here as a sacrifice. In Plato nothing indicates that it was understood as such, neither by his executioners nor by Socrates himself. In the present case the garlanded *Demonax* appears as a sacrificial animal—which is the more interesting for us because we shall find the same motif (the martyr killed as sacrificial animal) in several martyr acts. *Demonax* ultimately was not killed by the Athenians but ended his life by starving himself to death voluntarily when he was almost a hundred years old (see above).

It is clear that noble death cannot be considered as human sacrifice and the two have to be clearly distinguished. Nonetheless, the noble death tradition greatly influenced Christian martyr narratives.

## HEROIC DEATH FOR THE COUNTRY

“It is true of the good man too that he does many acts for the sake of his friends and his country, and if necessary dies for them; for he will throw away both wealth and honors and in general the goods that are objects of competition, gaining for himself nobility,” writes Aristotle.<sup>151</sup> Poets from Homer onwards praise this kind of death and philosophers point out its

<sup>149</sup> Tacitus, *Annales* 15.64, quoted by Seeley, *The Noble Death*, 137 (in Seeley erroneously 15.44).

<sup>150</sup> Lucian, *Demonax* 11, quoted by Seeley, *The Noble Death*, 139.

<sup>151</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1169a, trans. Ross and Urmson, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle* 2, ed. Barnes, 1848.

necessity.<sup>152</sup> All these texts concern soldiers in general, in other words, everybody who fights defending his country against the enemy. We must emphasize that dying for country and friends is not a religious act<sup>153</sup>; oracles or divine signs are not even mentioned in connection with it. Such a death, however, could be interpreted as a sacrifice. Thus we read in Pindar:

Hearken, O war-shoot (Ἰαλαλά<sup>154</sup>), daughter of war! Prelude of spears!  
To whom soldiers are sacrificed (θύεται) for their city's sake,  
In the holy sacrifice of death (ἱρόθυτον θάνατον).<sup>155</sup>

Those who died were worshipped as heroes: Simonides celebrated as such all those who had fallen at Thermopylae fighting for Hellas,<sup>156</sup> and to those who died at Plataea in 478 BCE sacrifices were offered even in Plutarch's time.<sup>157</sup>

From the nameless mass of these "heroes" who died for their homeland emerge the (historical or mythical) figures of particular outstanding persons: Hector, Codrus, Leonidas. Hector died in battle defending Troy; Codrus probably died similarly in battle, but his death, as we have seen, was re-interpreted in a mythical way; and the same holds true for Leonidas.<sup>158</sup>

## CONCLUSIONS

In the environment in which Christianity was born and began to develop human sacrifice was well-known, first and foremost from literary and mythical sources, but some historical cases were also recorded (Carthage, Rome). We shall not be surprised to discover that early Christianity made ample use of the ideas presented above in seeking to interpret the death of Jesus and the martyrs and to oppose them to former "pagan" sacrifices.

<sup>152</sup> Hengel, *Atonement*, 9–14.

<sup>153</sup> Against Hengel, who affirms that "dying for one's city" ... always has an essentially religious character," *Atonement*, 11.

<sup>154</sup> Onomatopoe, personification of battle-cry.

<sup>155</sup> Pindar, Fr. 66 by Werner, *Pindar: Siegesgesänge und Fragmente*, quoted by Hengel, *Atonement*, 11.

<sup>156</sup> Fr. 1(4), in Buchholz and Sitzler, *Anthologie aus den Lyrikern der Griechen* 2,54 (l. 3: βωμὸς δ' ὁ τάφος ...)

<sup>157</sup> Hengel, *Atonement* 11.

<sup>158</sup> Cf. Herodotus 7.220, see above 40.

I have tried to distinguish as clearly as possible the notions of human sacrifice, “the noble death of the philosopher” and “heroic death for the country,” and to establish their respective characteristics. In the following chapters we shall investigate their impact on (Jewish and Christian) martyrology.

I have argued that the so-called Greek sacrificial ideology, according to which the human victim had to agree to be killed and even rejoice in it, was an invention of Euripides who combined the ancient idea that in extreme situations the community can be saved only through human sacrifice with the equally ancient ideal of “heroic death for the country” (on the battlefield, naturally) and applied the “comedy of innocence” equally to human victims. Thus he transformed helpless victims into proud heroes who voluntarily sacrifice themselves for the sake of others (“*unus pro omnibus*”).

Nonetheless, we have treated this kind of death as a special case of human sacrifice, because, as Versnel states, “there is no rigorous distinction between general human sacrifice and self-sacrifice.”<sup>159</sup> But as this “sacrificial ideology” influenced the interpretation of Jesus’ death and, most of all, Jewish and Christian ideas about martyrdom, it is necessary to dwell on it somewhat longer.

We have reviewed a number of mythical and legendary examples of self-sacrifice among the Greeks and Romans. Historical examples are by no means numerous<sup>160</sup>; perhaps the devotion of the Decii can be considered as such, even if legendary elements intermingle with the facts.<sup>161</sup>

We shall now summarize the characteristic features of these stories:

- The situation is always one of extreme danger (war, plague, famine).
- The necessity of the sacrifice is announced by an oracle.
- It is clear that the sacrifice is required by some divinity, but for the most part the identity of this divinity remains uncertain.
- In several cases the disaster was the punishment for some affront committed against the divinity, which must be expiated by such a sacrifice.
- It is generally accepted that these self-sacrifices are purificatory and/or expiatory. In some cases, however, this is not evident. The most

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<sup>159</sup> Versnel, “Self-sacrifice,” 148.

<sup>160</sup> Concerning the Greeks several scholars have argued quite convincingly that no historical example is known, see above n. 14.

<sup>161</sup> The father/son/grandson relationship is probably legendary.



intriguing case is that of the first Decius. The apparition in his dream before the battle tells him that the underworld deities and Mother Earth require from one of the parties the army, and from the other the general. Thus both parties have to give something which—as it seems—is due (*deberi*) to the gods, to whom, however, it is a matter of indifference which party gives the general and which the army: *utrius ... eius populi* (we might expect the enemy's general to have had the same dream, but this seems not to have been the case). The losses in war on both sides are not the consequences of some “sin,” they are simply the natural due of the gods.

- The victim must be noble and, if possible, the noblest person (as in the legend of Curtius).
- The victim has to give his life voluntarily.
- Normally the victim has to be killed by others—either sacrificed by his own people or slaughtered in battle by the enemy; he is not permitted to die by his own hand (this is e.g. quite clear in the case of Codrus, who must use artifice in order to get himself killed<sup>162</sup>). The suicide of Menoeceus is, however, accepted by the divinity. Here again we note that the boundary between voluntary sacrifice and suicide is quite blurred, just as between suicide and voluntary martyrdom.

The attitude of classical Greece and Rome to human sacrifice is just as ambiguous as that of ancient Israel: it is considered a thoroughly unlawful custom practiced only by barbarians and/or in early times (and later abolished by some—divine or human—civilizer),<sup>163</sup> but in concrete cases it is accepted and even practiced. Those who sacrifice themselves voluntarily are venerated as heroes.

As sacrifice becomes “voluntary,” its character also changes in some respects. First of all, the victim begins to have his/her own point of view. Human sacrifice was normally offered to the divinity by the community who hoped for some reward in return and supposed that it would please the divinity (who often expressly demanded the sacrifice). There is no question of the victim profiting from being offered up. But if somebody gives his life freely

<sup>162</sup> According to some sources Pyrrhus gave an order to his soldiers not to kill anyone clad with the habit of *devotio*, cf. Schwenn, *Die Menschenopfer*, 158.

<sup>163</sup> Hughes, *Human Sacrifice*, 187; cf. Futrell, *Blood in the Arena*, 203–5.

for others, it is evident that that person, too, hopes to gain something in return: a glorious memory with posterity, or some otherworldly reward. This means that the individual point of view grows ever more important, until in Christian martyrdom it gains center stage.<sup>164</sup>

In the Introduction<sup>165</sup> we have pointed out that, by becoming “voluntary,” human sacrifice tends to leave the domain of cult. The victim begins to have his own point of view and often does not remain within the circle of “holiness.” It is interesting to compare the sacrifices of the Decii and Menoeceus. Whereas the first did everything in order to make *sacer* the place and the circumstances of their devotion, in the latter case we find nothing of this, and so his act becomes a simple suicide—which nonetheless is accepted as sacrifice. This change, the blurring of the demarcation line between holy and profane, had very far-reaching consequences on the meaning of (voluntary) sacrifice. Later we shall return to this question.

Beside Greco-Roman stories about (mythical or real) human sacrifices and their ideas about noble death, heroic death and self-sacrifice, the Carthaginian practice of child sacrifice and cases of self-immolation probably also had considerable influence on Christian martyrology.

Finally, we must examine briefly from which layers of society human sacrifices were mostly offered. Girard argues that those persons were apt to be sacrificed who did not entirely belong to society: children, adolescents not yet initiated, strangers, and marginal persons, as well as the king who, contrary to the others, stood not below but above the society. Girard remarks that though women generally were not regarded as full members of society, they were not sacrificed, because, according to him, the killing of a woman might have entailed vengeance either on the part of her parents or her husband.<sup>166</sup> On the basis of our previous investigations we cannot completely accept Girard’s statements. For him one of the most important groups of human sacrifice is constituted by the *pharmakoi*; it is, however, far from being certain if these latter can be considered as human sacrifices (for probably they were not killed, but only driven away), and therefore this does not constitute proof that mostly persons from the lowest layers of society were sacrificed. In fact, our examples have demonstrated just the contrary: though sometimes strang-

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<sup>164</sup> Cf. Stroumsa, *The End of Sacrifice*, 58, 62.

<sup>165</sup> See above 8.

<sup>166</sup> Girard, *La violence et le sacré*, 24–25.

ers or captives were immolated, the great majority of human sacrifices came from among the nobles or even the noblest. Further, Girard does not seem to realize the important role of young, unmarried persons of both sexes. As they had already left childhood behind but were not yet living a family life of their own, they were the most perfect and valuable gifts to be offered to the deity.<sup>167</sup> A small detail merits attention: in Euripides' *The Phoenician women* Teiresias states that the brother of Menoeceus, Haemon, cannot be offered because he is already married (944–45), and Teiresias seems to express here a generally known fact. Thus it seems that (at least in certain cases) being married disqualifies the would-be victim. In this chapter we have seen many examples of young boys and girls (not children!) being offered to a deity or offering themselves willingly, and many more could be added.

The same holds for the OT in which all the three cases of human sacrifice reported in detail (the heir apparent of Moab, Isaac, Jephthah's daughter) probably belong to this category; Jephthah's daughter is the typical virgin who is sacrificed instead of getting married.

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<sup>167</sup> Let us note that the slaughtering of a young, unmarried girl could just as well lead to family conflict and revenge, as it happened in the case of Aeschylus' Iphigeneia.



## Early Judaism

As stated in chapter 1, the idea of “dying for” is unknown in ancient Israel. There are no instances in which somebody is ready to offer his life for some noble cause or in order to save others (the only possible exception being Isa 53, which at least could be understood in this way).<sup>1</sup> But in the Hellenistic period the situation begins to change. During the persecutions of Antiochus Epiphanes, when the king prohibited Jewish religious practice, some Jews (probably not in very great number) openly refused to obey the command of the king and accepted torture and death rather than deny the faith of their forefathers. It is a question of debate if they can actually be called martyrs since the notion itself was formed only much later by Christian authors. Here we come up against the problem of whether martyrdom was from the beginning a typically Christian phenomenon or if there existed already a Jewish “martyrology.” As we have pointed out in our Introduction, the answer to this depends entirely on our definition of martyrdom, and we have seen also that it is impossible to give an objective definition of this term. For the purposes of the present work the description of Drodge and Tabor has proved useful enough, and accordingly we shall use freely such expressions as ‘Maccabean martyrs’ or ‘Jewish martyrology.’

We must not forget, however, that we have no access to the words and thoughts of the martyrs themselves neither can we know exactly what really happened. 1 Macc does not even mention martyrs, 2 Macc describes sev-

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Versnel, “Quid Athenis,” 178.

eral cases where Jews were tortured and put to death because of their convictions, while in *4 Macc.* the tortures of the same persons become much more cruel, which raises serious doubts as the authenticity of these stories. What we have are only the reports of pious Jews who, instead of proposing to write an objective history of the events, were striving first and foremost to create heroes and to establish them as examples for their compatriots.

In this way, Jewish martyrology came into being. An immense literature now exists concerning its characteristics, its roots and its relations to the OT as well as to Greco-Roman thinking. It remains controversial in what measure it is rooted in post-exilic Judaism or in the classical tradition, or again in what measure it influenced the interpretation of Jesus' death as sacrifice, on the one hand, and early Christian martyrology, on the other. In any event, these accounts of "dying for God" became very popular among Christians, though they appear in Rabbinic martyrology as well.<sup>2</sup>

We shall not treat all these questions in detail, but rather concentrate on the sacrificial character of martyrdom as it appears in early Jewish texts.<sup>3</sup> Later, when examining early Christian martyr stories, we shall try to establish if they could have been influenced by these Jewish texts.

## THE BEGINNINGS OF JEWISH MARTYROLOGY

### *Book of Daniel*

In the Book of Daniel the three young men thrown into the furnace of blazing fire (Dan 3) symbolize the righteous who opposed the commands of the king. Although in the end they are saved through a miracle, in Rabbinic tradition they became the prototypes of the pious martyr. The prayer of Azariah (Dan 3.24–45) was probably originally written in Hebrew and can be dated to the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE. It has come down to us only in two Greek versions: one of them is the version of the Septuagint, the other that of Theodotion. 3.39–40 reads as follows according to LXX: "Like a holocaust of rams and bulls, like ten thousand fat sheep, so may our sacrifice be before you today to

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Boyarin, *Dying for God*, 115–18; van Henten, "Martyrium II," col. 309–16.

<sup>3</sup> Thus we leave out of consideration some—otherwise quite important—passages of Josephus and Philo concerning the martyrs because this motif does not appear in them.

bring about atonement with you (ἐξιλάσαι ὀπισθὲν σου).<sup>4</sup> This is probably the first time in Judaism that expiatory power is attributed to the death of the righteous. Expiation was necessary because of the sins of the Jewish people: the beginning of the prayer (3.28–32) clearly states that the persecution was sent by God as punishment for their transgression. As this happens in a situation in which temple sacrifices have ceased to be performed (according to Daniel because of the captivity and the destruction of the temple, in reality because of the decree of Antiochus and desacralization of the temple), the oblation the three young men make of their lives would substitute for the sacrificial cult which could have purified the people.<sup>5</sup> Grappe and Marx insist on the parallel between the (intended) sacrifice of Azariah and his companions and the Yom Kippur ritual.<sup>6</sup>

### *Maccabean martyrs*

As to 2 Macc, it is controversial whether the idea of expiatory death is present or not. The martyrdom of old Eleazar (6.18–31) is beneficial for others only as an example, not as expiation. However, the seven brothers tortured and killed by Antiochus (ch. 7) consider themselves as sacrifices: they die for the law (7.23,37) and their death is expiation for their own sins (7.18,32) but also for those of the whole nation (7.38). The last brother says to his torturers: “I, like my brothers, give up body and life for the laws of our ancestors, appealing to God to show mercy soon to our nation and by trials and plagues to make you confess that he alone is God, and through me and my brothers to bring to an end the wrath of the Almighty that has justly fallen on the whole nation” (7.37–38). And indeed their death is the turning point of events: Judas Maccabeus becomes invincible, “for the wrath of the Lord had turned to mercy” (8.5).

We can identify here the familiar paradigm: ritual fault (the Hellenized Jews abandoned the faith and the practices of their forefathers)—divine wrath (persecutions raised as punishment, cf. 6.12–17)—divine wrath appeased through a certain quantity of innocent human blood (Maccabean martyrs).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Hengel, *Atonement*, 61. The version of NRSV is here of no great help: “....such may our sacrifice be in your sight today and may we unreservedly follow you” (3.17), with the note: “Meaning of Gk uncertain.”

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Grappe and Marx, *Sacrifices scandaleux*, 92.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 94–97.

At this point we must pause for a moment. It is generally admitted that the Maccabean martyr narratives show Greek influence, which is certainly true; but it is equally important to appreciate the underlying OT ideas. According to deuteronomistic historiography all the troubles suffered by Israel can be subsumed in the pattern: “transgression—divine wrath—punishment, suffering—appeasement of the wrath—divine mercy”; but those who suffer are always the same as those who have sinned—the whole nation or a certain group of it; or it can happen that the whole nation has to pay for the fault of the king, because the king symbolizes the nation. In 2 Macc, as in the whole OT, the collective point of view prevails<sup>7</sup>: the sin was committed by the nation and the nation has to suffer in consequence, even if not all its members have sinned.

Greek ideology on the other hand is different. There also the troubles are inaugurated by a ritual fault, but this fault is never a collective one. The sin is committed by a single person or, rarely, by a small group, but never by “the people.” The punishment strikes the whole community, but to stop it the (voluntary) death of a single person alone is necessary. And in the majority of cases, this person is not only innocent but the noblest member of the community. This sacrificial ideology, which we analyzed in the preceding chapter, constitutes the ideological background to Greek and Roman accounts of voluntary sacrifices.

2 Macc presents a very interesting mixture of Jewish and classical ideas: the fault was committed collectively, punishment for it is equally collective, but in order to stop it the voluntary death of a certain number of innocent persons is required (for even if the seven brothers accept suffering as punishment for their own sins they had no part in the transgressions which led to the persecutions). This ideology, which was born in 2 Macc, will survive in Christianity and will determine the interpretation of the persecutions.

To summarize the argument so far, we reiterate that the death of the seven brothers is indeed considered as an expiatory sacrifice. These ideas, merely outlined in 2 Macc, receive stronger emphasis in 4 Macc. Eleazar, dying under torture, prays to God to be merciful to the people and to accept his blood as their purification (καθάρσιον αὐτῶν) and his life as a

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<sup>7</sup> We have somewhat simplified the matter; it is true that some prophetic texts emphasize personal responsibility, but after the captivity historiography returns to the idea of collective sin and punishment.



ransom—*antipsuchon* (ἀντίψυχον)—for them (6.28–29). The first of the seven brothers admonishes the others to endure the torments, because their struggle will cause mercy to come (9.24; cf. 12.17). The martyrs are ransoms for the sins of the people (ἀντίψυχον ... τῆς τοῦ ἔθνους ἁμαρτίας), and because of the blood of the righteous and the expiatory sacrifice—*hilastērion* (ἱλαστήριον)—of their deaths divine providence has saved Israel (17.21–22) and the people enjoys peace (18.4).<sup>8</sup>

This means that the death (and the very cruel death at that) of some righteous persons served as redemption for the sins of the people and restored normal relations between God and men.<sup>9</sup> We have come very near to the tragedies of Euripides in which the death of a noble person was needed in order to stop the calamities and to restore the normal relations between men and god(s).

So we see that voluntary sacrifice,<sup>10</sup> which nonetheless remains a human sacrifice, is replaced by voluntary martyrdom. But something has changed: in ancient sacrifices the victim was supposed to be immolated in the fastest possible way; they did not need to suffer. The stories about heroic death are very discreet about death itself; they do not abound in gruesome details. However, in the case of the Maccabean martyrs (also in 2 Macc, but above all in 4 Macc.) the (fictitious or real) suffering gains ground enormously.

The description of the death of the Maccabean martyrs, both in 2 Macc and in 4 Macc., is greatly influenced by the classical paradigm of “defying the tyrant”: the heroes before dying explain their reasons for accepting death and torture, they point out how futile all the efforts of the king are because, in reality, he has no power over them, and they revile him (“you accursed wretch,” 2 Macc 7.9; “you unholy wretch,” 2 Macc 7.34 etc.) and threaten him with the judgement of God.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup> These well-known passages have been analyzed by numerous authors, see e.g. Williams, *Jesus’ Death*, 183–97 (a very thorough treatment); Grappe and Marx, *Sacrifices scandaleux*, 99–102.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. de Jonge, “Jesus’ death for others and the death of the Maccabean martyrs,” in *Jewish Eschatology, Early Christian Christology*, 133.

<sup>10</sup> We shall return later to the “voluntary” character of these sacrifices and that of martyrdom.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Hadas and Smith, *Heroes and Gods*, 88–94; Hadas, *Hellenistic Culture*, 179–80.

*Wisdom of Solomon*

The deuterocanonical book called the Wisdom of Solomon was composed in Greek, probably in Alexandria about 50 BCE or perhaps even later. The death of the righteous receives a sacrificial meaning in Wis 3:

- 5 Having been disciplined a little, they will receive great good,  
because God tested them and found  
them worthy of himself;
- 6 like gold in the furnace he tried them,  
and as a sacrificial burnt offering he accepted them.
- 7 In the time of their visitation they will shine forth,  
and will run like sparks through the stubble.
- 8 They will govern nations and rule over peoples,  
and the Lord will reign over them forever.

Our passage concerns the fate of the righteous in general and not that of the martyrs, but from the preceding chapter it becomes clear that the ‘righteous’ are precisely those who, just as in 2 Macc, remained true to God and his commands, and for that reason were tortured and even put to death by the ‘wicked’ (cf. 2.12–20).<sup>12</sup> The text does not make it clear whether their sacrifice is expiatory. Several motifs of their otherworldly fate will turn up in Christian martyrological texts.

In the preceding chapters we have remarked that voluntary sacrifices tend to step outside the domain of cult, which raises the question why should they still be considered as sacrifices. Menoeceus, for example, who was destined to become a “regular” human sacrifice, committed suicide in a completely non-ritualistic way. The case of the early Jewish martyrs is quite the opposite: they are executed as criminals for transgressing the decrees of the king. From the point of view of their executioners their death has only punitive value, and it happens in a completely secular context, without any ritual. For the martyrs themselves and their compatriots, however, it receives a cultic meaning; or to put it more exactly, the martyr narratives interpret these exe-

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<sup>12</sup> A fact which Grappe and Marx do not seem to appreciate, maintaining that the fate of the righteous could be considered as sacrificial even if their blood was not shed, *Sacrifices scandaleux*, 103.

cutions in a cultic way. We shall have the opportunity to observe the same process in an even more pronounced way in the case of Jesus' death.

### *Suffering*

The martyr stories of 2 Macc, and even more of 4 Macc., are full of gruesome details: martyrs are not simply put to death, they are burnt, dismembered, roasted and so on. This is radically different from the former attitude with regard to death: there are no stories in the OT about slow and gruesome executions and the death of the protagonists is always related in a succinct way. The worst what can happen is that someone does not receive a proper burial, as it was the case with Jezebel. By the time of the Maccabees the mentality has changed. We shall not dwell on the description of the tortures, either here or elsewhere in this work, but as this sadistic predilection for describing gruesome details survives in Christian martyr narratives, and, as time goes on, becomes stronger and stronger, we cannot avoid searching for its roots.

In the thinking of ancient Israel suffering is not caused by the demons but by God, and it is unequivocally bad. When it strikes man it is always as a well-deserved punishment.<sup>13</sup> The same is true for the whole people of Israel: the Deuteronomist and, in an even more pronounced way, the Chronicler understands the whole history of Israel as a succession of transgressions and punishments. Man receives the recompense of his good or evil deeds here in this earthly life, and there is no retribution in the netherworld. If someone lives a pious life, all his affairs will prosper and he will reach old age in peace and happiness. If, on the contrary, he does not respect the divine commands, he will fail in whatever he undertakes and will die early. In other words, if someone is stricken by misfortune and suffering, it happens necessarily because of his own fault; he himself is to be blamed and no one else. It is exactly this way of thinking, represented by the friends of Job, against which the latter revolts.

As time goes on, this ideology cannot be upheld any longer, for experience shows just the contrary: while the pious is forced to suffer, the ungodly prosper without encountering any setback. In order to explain these facts, new theories had to be created. In this way, suffering was given a pedagogi-

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<sup>13</sup> Even if according to Gen 3 suffering came into the world because of the transgression of Adam and Eve, there is no trace of original sin in the OT.

cal—i.e. exemplary or instructive—meaning: it serves 1. to reprove, see Prov 3.11–12: “My child, do not despise the LORD’s discipline or be weary of his reproof, for the LORD reproves the one he loves, as a father the son in whom he delights”; 2. to test, see Ps 26(25).2: “Prove me, O Lord and try me; test (by fire) my heart and mind”; 3. to purify, see e.g. Zech 13.9: “And I will put this third into the fire, refine them as one refines silver, and test them as gold is tested.” In the last case, suffering has an expiatory power, but it expiates only the sins of the one who suffers, and there is no vicarious suffering.

Pedagogical suffering can attain its purpose only if the person touched by it survives and can derive some benefit from it; the cases we have just mentioned do not lead to death.

It is clear that only the righteous are affected by pedagogical suffering, which therefore comes to be considered as a divine privilege. It has nothing to do with the punishment reserved for the ungodly, cf. Jdt 8.25–27, or Wis 3.5: “Having been disciplined a little, they will receive great good, because God tested them and found them worthy of himself”; and Wis 3.10: “But the ungodly will be punished as their reasoning deserves...” In the relatively late Wisdom of Solomon the righteous have to suffer in this world; but in the netherworld they will receive their compensation, and the ungodly their punishment.<sup>14</sup>

It is particularly interesting for our purpose that according to some relatively late passages of the Hebrew Bible sacrifice can be replaced by suffering. During the captivity in Babylon the temple cult could not function, so the notion of ‘sacrifice’ had to be reevaluated. As Ps 51.17–18 expresses it: “For you have no delight in sacrifice; if I were to give a burnt offering, you would not be pleased. The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit ...” Similarly in Wis 3.6: “...like gold in the furnace he tried them, and like burnt offering he accepted them.” In this verse the suffering and death of the martyr is considered as a sacrifice, just as in 2 Macc and 4 Macc. In this case, expiatory suffering (purification) is connected with the death of the person—which makes sense only if there is a life after death in which the righteous can receive his recompense, exactly as it is presumed by Wisdom as well as by 2 Macc and 4 Macc. The underlying ideas, however, are quite different: while Wisdom supposes a glorious, angel-like state for the soul of the righ-

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<sup>14</sup> Cf. Wis 11.10: “For you tested them as a parent does in warning, but you examined the ungodly as a stern king does in condemnation.”

teous, 2 Macc and 4 Macc. imagines a very concrete and corporeal kind of resurrection in which the martyrs will receive back intact all their tortured and mutilated members.

The Maccabean martyrs die in an extremely ignominious way and their deaths become truly heroic precisely because of their courageously endured tortures; in other words, suffering increased the value of their sacrifice.<sup>15</sup>

The dating of the Maccabean martyr accounts<sup>16</sup> is problematical. 2 Macc 6.18–31 and 7 are perhaps later additions. As to 4 Macc., its dating is quite uncertain; it was written probably in the first century AD or perhaps even later, at the beginning of the second century. It is therefore controversial whether they could have influenced the writings of the New Testament and the early Christian martyr acts. In any case, during the first century AD a certain “theology of martyrdom” had been formed in Judaism (even if the word ‘martyr’ was not yet used in the sense we understand it) which influenced both Christian and Jewish martyrology.<sup>17</sup>

The basic idea remained the same ancient conviction according to which in situations of extreme distress the troubles caused by divine anger can only be stopped through the effusion of human blood. But times had changed: it was no longer acceptable to put the facts so bluntly. The harshness of the facts must be attenuated and along with this the responsibility taken, at least partially, from the divinity, therefore it becomes obligatory that the person to be slaughtered give his agreement, or even better, that he should rejoice in it and act as if he could hardly wait to be killed.

The new ideology did not leave the human sacrifices of the OT untouched, either. As we saw in the first chapter, the OT contains three reports about human sacrifices that were actually performed (or almost performed): the prince of Moab, Jephthah’s daughter and Isaac. Naturally, we cannot expect that Jewish tradition should turn the prince of Moab into a Euripidean hero; but in the two other cases the transformation did indeed take place. It is true that the two cases cannot be strictly compared: while the Aqedah, the sac-

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Baslez, *Les persécutions*, 159–62.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. e.g. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* 2, 533–34.

<sup>17</sup> Rabbinic Judaism showed a more rational and moderate attitude toward martyrdom than Christianity, see Ephraim Kanarfogel, “Martyrium II,” in *TRE* 22 (1992), 203–7; Joseph Dan, “Martyr VI. Judaism,” in *RPP* 8 (2010), 104–5.

rifice of Isaac, is accorded a central place in Jewish tradition, Jephthah's daughter remains marginal. All the same, Josephus and Pseudo-Philo elaborate on her story, and some centuries later Origen makes her the predecessor of the Christian martyrs. Before turning to the interpretation of the Aqedah, we shall briefly treat the case of Jephthah's daughter.

## THE TRANSFORMATIONS OF JEPHTHAH'S DAUGHTER

Josephus' version of the story (*Jewish Antiquities* 5.263–66) keeps close to the biblical narrative, but he attributes to the girl motivations which she does not seem to have in Judges 11. In the Bible she is ready to die (without being very happy about it) because a vow uttered before the Lord cannot be withdrawn. In Josephus, however, she dies “not unwillingly/not without pleasure” (οὐκ ἀηδῶς) “for the victory of her father and the freedom of her country” (ἐπὶ νίκῃ τοῦ πατρὸς καὶ ἐλευθερίᾳ τῶν πολιτῶν, 5.265). Thus she has been transformed from the passive victim of a ritual killing into a self-conscious heroine offering herself gladly for her homeland, just as her classical counterparts did. Josephus states unequivocally that the holocaust was actually carried out. His attitude concerning this sacrifice is ambiguous, however: while he exalts the behavior of the girl, he condemns Jephthah for having uttered this vow, because he did not act according to the Law nor did he fulfil the will of the Lord and, above all, because he did not think of the future, of what people would say about his act (5.266).<sup>18</sup>

The attitude of Josephus is the same as that of his Greco-Roman counterparts: they condemn human sacrifice as antiquated and barbaric, but consider voluntary sacrifice as noble and exemplary. This ambiguity will survive into Christianity.

The other early Jewish work which gives an interesting paraphrase of Judges 11 is Pseudo-Philo's *Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum* (*LAB*)—“Book of Biblical Antiquities”—composed probably at the end of the first century AD, at any rate after 70. In *LAB* the heroic character of Jephthah's daughter, called here Seila, receives an even stronger emphasis (ch. 40).<sup>19</sup> She declares she dies gladly for her nation (“And who is there who would be sad in death, seeing the people free?,” 40.2) and only fears whether her death will be acceptable before

<sup>18</sup> Regarding this passage see also Grappe and Marx, *Sacrifices scandaleux*, 118–19.

<sup>19</sup> See also the thorough analysis of this passage in Grappe and Marx, *Sacrifices scandaleux*, 119–27.

the Lord: "...if I did not offer myself willingly for sacrifice, I fear that my death would not be acceptable or I would lose my life in vain" (40.3).<sup>20</sup> She expresses here the essence of the new sacrificial ideology: God delights only in such human sacrifices which are offered with the agreement of the victim.

The Bible reports briefly that before dying she spent two months on the mountains with her companions bewailing her virginity (Judges 11.38). For *LAB*, this short note is not sufficient; instead, it gives the text of the lamentations she uttered before God. According to its translator, Hadot, in this hymn-like passage "she emphasizes first of all the greatness of a virginal sacrifice rather than the sadness of death. She develops the topic of offering her life voluntarily, a topic which evokes the sacrifice of Isaac (cf. [*LAB*] XVIII, 5; XXXII, 2–4)."<sup>21</sup> It is true that her behavior is similar to that of Isaac; but I think we have to look elsewhere for the model after which both figures have been formed—namely the tragedies of Euripides (and in a lesser degree, Sophocles). Isaac imitates Menoeceus, as I shall endeavor to demonstrate below, whereas Jephthah's daughter resembles those virgins who accept death in place of marriage (Antigone, Macaria, Polyxena, Iphigeneia).<sup>22</sup> This parallel can be very easily established: she is a virgin offered for the well-being of the community, and she proudly accepts her fate just as her tragic counterparts did. Jephthah's daughter must die because of a hasty vow of her father; according to *Iphigeneia in Tauris* Iphigeneia must die because her father has vowed to sacrifice to Artemis the fairest thing that the year would produce (20–23), and this "thing" was naturally Iphigeneia.<sup>23</sup> Seila's canticle also presents a number of similarities with the last words of the tragic heroines. The first half of the canticle is addressed to the mountains: "Hear, you mountains, my lamentation..." (40.5),<sup>24</sup> which evokes for Grappe and Marx the lament of Iphigeneia that she is unable to charm the rocks (*Iphigeneia in Aulis* 1211–12). I am not sure whether this comparison is valid or not; for me it seems more noteworthy that she addresses the second half of her discourse to her mother (*LAB* 40.6)—who is not mentioned at all in the Bible—a

<sup>20</sup> Harrington, trans., *Pseudo-Philo*, in *The OT Pseudepigrapha* 2, ed. Charlesworth, 353.

<sup>21</sup> Hadot, trans., *Livre des Antiquités bibliques*, 1343, note ad loc.

<sup>22</sup> Grappe and Marx, *Sacrifices scandaleux*, 124–27, note the similarity between Iphigeneia in Euripides and Jephthah's daughter in Pseudo-Philo.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Grappe and Marx, *Sacrifices scandaleux*, 125.

<sup>24</sup> Transl. Harrington, *Pseudo-Philo*, in *The OT Pseudepigrapha* 2, 354.

motif which readily evokes Polyxena and Iphigeneia.<sup>25</sup> In 40.6 the expression “Sheol has become my bridal chamber” is a paraphrase of Sophocles’ *Antigone* 891: ὦ τύμβος, ὦ νυμφεῖον (“oh tomb, oh bridal chamber”).<sup>26</sup>

Here we are able to follow very closely how Greek “sacrificial ideology” contributed to the re-interpretation of an OT human sacrifice. We shall subsequently be able to show the same phenomenon to be true in the case of Isaac, too.

Pseudo-Philo, like Josephus, condemns Jephthah because of his vow, but the reasons are not the same. In *LAB* his fault is not to have promised a human sacrifice but to have specified so vaguely whom he intended to sacrifice. God reacts angrily to the vow:

Behold, Jephthah has vowed that he will offer to me whatever meets him first on the way; and now if a dog should meet Jephthah first, will the dog be offered to me? And now let the vow of Jephthah be accomplished against his own firstborn, that is, against the fruit of his own body, and his request against his only-begotten. But I will surely free my people in this time, not because of him but because of the prayer that Israel prayed. (39.11)<sup>27</sup>

God’s indignation is aroused by the imprecise wording of the vow which leaves open the possibility of the sacrifice of a dog, and to punish Jephthah he makes him kill his daughter—quite superfluously now, since the victory does not depend on it. Thus God has nothing against human sacrifice, he is affronted to be offered only the sacrifice of a dog.

The attitude of Pseudo-Philo toward human sacrifice is more tolerant than that of Josephus; he finds it quite “normal,” especially if the victim agrees to it.

## THE INTERPRETATION OF THE AQEDAH<sup>28</sup>

The interpretation of the Binding of Isaac, the Aqedah, is particularly important for our purpose since it constitutes the missing link between human sac-

<sup>25</sup> A similarity not noted by Grappe and Marx.

<sup>26</sup> Neither was this very characteristic similarity noted by Grappe and Marx.

<sup>27</sup> Transl. Harrington, *Pseudo-Philo*, in *The OT Pseudepigrapha* 2, 353.

<sup>28</sup> From the enormous literature written about this topic see notably Vermes, “Redemption and Genesis XXII,” which gives the most important Jewish sources.



rifice and martyrdom: Isaac, who has been in the Bible only a victim lacking a will of his own, becomes in the books of the Maccabees the prototype of the martyr. Jewish writings of the Roman period emphasize not only the willingness of Abraham, but also the voluntary acceptance and gladness of Isaac in regard to his fate,<sup>29</sup> and while Christian exegetical tradition concentrates mainly on the figure of Abraham, in Jewish tradition it was Isaac's merits, rather than those of Abraham, which received ever greater attention.<sup>30</sup>

As we have sought to demonstrate above, the sacrifice of Isaac in Gen 22 is unique among the known human sacrifices of antiquity in having no purpose and no reason at all. It could be expected that posterity would strive to give a sense to it and, indeed, it did manage to achieve this through attributing an expiatory value to Isaac's death. We shall now examine these two motifs: Isaac as prototype of the martyr and the Aqedah as an expiatory sacrifice, in which we shall pay special attention to the 'blood' and 'ashes' of Isaac. Finally we shall treat a special kind of interpretation which neither makes a martyr of Isaac nor attributes any expiatory value to his sacrifice, but nevertheless celebrates the Aqedah as the best of human sacrifices.

### *Isaac as prototype of the martyr: the obedience of Isaac*

Jewish tradition applies the name "Aqedah" to the sacrifice of Isaac and emphasizes first and foremost the obedience of Isaac.<sup>31</sup> We do not know exactly when this motif made its appearance.<sup>32</sup> Its first witness is perhaps the Qumranic writing 4Q225, called by the editors *Pseudo-Jubilees*.<sup>33</sup> The manuscript can be dated to the end of the first century BCE or to the beginning of the first century AD. The second fragment of 4Q225 re-writes Gen 22.<sup>34</sup> The text is very fragmentary, and the words exchanged between Abraham and Isaac are lost, but it is evident that Isaac, after asking for the animal to be immolated, just as in the Bible, begins to speak a second time, contrary

<sup>29</sup> Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection*, 173; Vermes, "Redemption and Genesis XXII," 195–96

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Harl, "La 'ligature' d'Isaac (Gen. 22,9) dans la Septante et chez les Pères grecs," 62 (somewhat simplifying the situation); Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection*, 173, 187.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Sabourin, "Sacrifice," in *DBS* 10 (1985), col. 1509.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. de Jonge, "Jesus' Death," 130. The NT makes no allusions to the obedience of Isaac.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. García Martínez, "The Sacrifice of Isaac in 4Q225," 44–57.

<sup>34</sup> García Martínez and Tigchelaar, eds. and trans., *The Dead Sea Scrolls* 1, 478–81.

to the Bible. His words are not preserved, but we can presume that he here gives his agreement to being sacrificed. 4Q225 is probably a non-sectarian writing, therefore we can suppose that these ideas were already widespread in Judaism at the turn of the millenium and were not limited to the community of Qumran.

At any rate, this tradition is well attested at the end of the first and the beginning of the second century AD in Josephus, in *4 Macc.* and, in a more elaborate manner, in Pseudo-Philo.<sup>35</sup> The obedience of Isaac is likewise stressed by the Targums and in Midrashic literature.<sup>36</sup>

Josephus composes his works according to the rules of Greek historiography and in the most decisive moments puts fictive speeches into the mouths of his protagonists. Abraham, before killing his son, explains to him with lofty words why this is necessary and demonstrates to him the exceptional divine grace which permits him to die in this way instead of finishing his life in illness or on the battlefield as ordinary people do. Isaac, naturally, accepts joyfully (πρὸς ἡδονήν) the words of his father and answers that if someone does not obey the will of God as well as that of his father he would not deserve to have been born, since to disobey his father is already a sin. Then he approaches the altar ready to be slaughtered (ἐπὶ ... τὴν σφαγὴν) (*Jewish Antiquities* 1.232).

For Josephus the Aqedah takes place according to the “laws of sacrifice,” so it is only too natural for him that a father should immolate his son for God.

*LAB* develops the topic in more detail. Abraham announces to his son in a laconic way what will be happening, without giving any reasons: “Behold now, my son, I am offering you as a holocaust and am delivering you into the hands that gave you to me” (32.2). Isaac asks no questions and finds the announcement of his father absolutely normal:

Hear me, father. If a lamb of the flock is accepted as sacrifice to the Lord with an odor of sweetness and if for the wicked deeds of men animals are appointed to be killed, but man is designed to inherit the world, how then do you say to me, “Come and inherit life without limit and time without measure”? Yet have I not been born into the world to be offered as a sacrifice to him who made me? Now my blessedness will be

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<sup>35</sup> Cf. de Jonge, “Jesus’ Death,” 130.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Vermes, “Redemption and Genesis XXII,” 194–98.

above that of all men, because there will be nothing like this; and about me future generations will be instructed and through me the peoples will understand that the Lord has made the soul of a man worthy to be a sacrifice. (32.3)<sup>37</sup>

The logic of the speech is not quite clear. According to Grappe and Marx Isaac's sacrifice is understood here as the occasion of passing from the earthly world to the celestial one.<sup>38</sup> I am not convinced if this is really the case, but what counts is first and foremost the fact that Isaac is immolated for the sins of men and that he presents an example for the future generations (and not only for the Jews, but for humankind in general).<sup>39</sup>

The behavior and the words of Isaac evoke those of Menoeceus in Euripides (*The Phoenician Women* 1014–18), especially the farewell discourse of the latter, which shows marked similarity to the speech of Isaac.

- Both of them declare that it would be totally absurd if they were not ready to die.
- Both of them explain that it would be impossible for them to continue living under these circumstances.
- Both of them regard themselves as sacrifices chosen by God.
- Both of them want to set an example for future generations.

But there are also some important differences: while Menoeceus dies in order to save Thebes from final destruction (according to the oracle), in other words, from a very real and concrete danger, Isaac dies for abstract ideas which remain quite obscure. Further, Isaac seems to be convinced that his sacrifice has a universal relevance; Menoeceus, on the contrary, is interested only in the fate of his own community.

If the sacrifice of Isaac does not make much sense in Gen 22, it does not become much more reasonable here, either. We are told that Isaac dies for “the sins of men” (but what kind of sins and what kind of “men”?) and that through him the nations will understand that the Lord had made the human soul worthy to be sacrificed. It seems that for Pseudo-Philo the Aqedah does

<sup>37</sup> Transl. Harrington, *Pseudo-Philo*, in *The OT Pseudepigrapha* 2, 345.

<sup>38</sup> Grappe and Marx, *Sacrifices scandaleux*, 115.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. 4 Macc. 7.14; 13.12; 16.16–25; Heb 11.17–19.

not signify at all the end of human sacrifices; on the contrary, its aim is to propagate the practice in the form of voluntary sacrifice.

In *4 Macc.* the Jews dying for their faith are called the sons of Abraham (9.21; 18.23). Eleazar is compared to Isaac (7.14) and the future martyrs are admonished to follow the example of Isaac: “Remember whence you came, and the father by whose hand Isaac would have submitted to being slain for the sake of religion (διὰ τὴν εὐσέβειαν),” says one of the brothers to the other (13.12); “...you ought to endure any suffering for the sake of God. For his sake also our father Abraham was zealous to sacrifice his son Isaac, the ancestor of our nation; and when Isaac saw his father’s hand wielding a knife and descending upon him, he did not cower,” says the mother to her sons while watching Eleazar’s tortures (16.19–20<sup>40</sup>). All these passages emphasize the obedience of Isaac, and it is probably here for the first time that Isaac becomes the prototype of the martyr: he actually dies for God or for *eusebeia*, which means ‘piety’ but later also ‘religion.’

The targums<sup>41</sup> describe with relish Isaac’s obedience and his striving to become an acceptable sacrifice. According to the *Fragmentary Targum* to Gen 22.10 Isaac asks his father to bind him: “Bind my hands properly that I may not struggle in the time of my pain and disturb you and render your offering unfit...”<sup>42</sup> *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* also presents Gen 22 as a test for Isaac who boasted before Ishmael: “...were the Holy One, blessed be He, to ask for all my members, I would not deny them to Him.”<sup>43</sup> The early midrash *Sifre Deuteronomy* goes as far as to affirm (on the authority of Rabbi Meir [2<sup>nd</sup> century AD]) that Isaac bound himself upon the altar.<sup>44</sup>

### *The redemptive value of the Aqedah*

According to *LAB* 18.5 God declares to Balaam concerning Abraham: “Is it not regarding this people that I spoke to Abraham in a vision, saying: ‘Your seed will be like the stars of the heaven’ (Gen 22.17), when I lifted him above the firmament and showed him the arrangements of all the stars?

<sup>40</sup> See also 18.10–11.

<sup>41</sup> On the dating of the targums see inter alia Fraade, “Targum, Targumim,” 1280.

<sup>42</sup> Vermes, “Redemption and Genesis XXII,” 194.

<sup>43</sup> *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* on Gen 22.1, Vermes, “Redemption and Genesis XXII,” 197.

<sup>44</sup> Vermes, “Redemption and Genesis XXII,” 197; Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection*, 192.

And I demanded his son as a holocaust. And he brought him to be placed on the altar, but I gave him back to his father and, because he did not refuse, his offering was acceptable before me, and on account of his blood I chose them.”<sup>45</sup> Thus the promises made to Abraham and ultimately the election of Israel itself depended on the sacrifice of Isaac (in this passage the obedience of Isaac plays no role, it is only Abraham’s merit that counts).

The *Targum Neofiti* comments on Lev 22.27 as follows: “After this [the birth of Isaac], the lamb was chosen to recall the merit of the one man who was bound upon a mountain as a lamb for a burnt offering upon the altar. God delivered him in His merciful goodness, and when his [Isaac’s] children pray in the time of their distress and say, as they are obliged to say: ‘Answer us and listen to the cry of our prayer’, He agreed to remember on our behalf the Binding of Isaac our father.”<sup>46</sup> It seems that the Aqedah is connected here to Passover. The *Targum of the Song of Songs* declares explicitly that the sin of the golden calf was forgiven in remembrance of the merit of the Aqedah.<sup>47</sup>

An ancient tradition present already in *Jubilees* 17.15–18; 18.18–19 connects the Aqedah with the Passover. This tradition is attested as late as the second century AD<sup>48</sup>; later on, however, Jewish liturgy connected the Aqedah to Rosh ha-Shana, the New Year’s feast. From the Amoraic period onward it was read in the synagogues on the second day of the feast.

In the midrashim the merit of Isaac is so great and has such a redemptive value that it also suffices to save Israel from all their dangers and to obtain forgiveness for all their sins. Because of the “blood of the binding of Isaac” God spared in Egypt the firstborn sons of Israel and saved the sons of Israel when they passed through the sea.<sup>49</sup> Seeing the blood of Isaac God

<sup>45</sup> Transl. Harrington, *Pseudo-Philo*, in *The OT Pseudepigrapha* 2, 325.

<sup>46</sup> Quoted by Vermes, “Redemption and Genesis XII,” 211; cf. Sabourin, “Sacrifice,” col. 1509.

<sup>47</sup> *Targum of the Song of Songs* 1.13; 2.17; cf. Sabourin, “Sacrifice,” col. 1509.

<sup>48</sup> Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection*, 176–80; Vermes, “Redemption and Genesis XXII,” 215–16; van Ruiten, “Abraham, Job and the Book of Jubilees,” 58.

<sup>49</sup> Cf. *Mekilta de Rabbi Yishmael*, Pishā’ 7, quoted by Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection*, 180; cf. Vermes, “Redemption and Genesis XXII,” 206–7. This midrash can be dated probably to the fourth century AD.

stopped the destruction of Jerusalem (cf. 1 Chron 21.15).<sup>50</sup> According to *Exodus Rabba* 44.5, after the fabrication of the golden calf Moses prays to God that he spare his children and that Isaac's immolation may take the place of their immolation.<sup>51</sup> The redemptive value of Isaac's merit is not limited to this world but extends even to the netherworld: "Through the merits of Isaac, who offered himself upon the altar, the Holy One, blessed be He, shall raise the dead."<sup>52</sup> The ram's horn blown at New Year's Day has also been connected to the Aqedah: according to Rabbi Abbahu who lived in the third century AD the purpose in blowing it is to remind God of the Binding of Isaac.<sup>53</sup>

Rabbinic sources attribute an everlasting effect to Isaac's sacrifice and make of it the prototype of all sacrifices,<sup>54</sup> the purpose of which is first of all to recall to God the merit of Isaac.

### *The 'blood' and 'ashes' of Isaac*

It is worth noting the importance of blood: although according to Gen 22 no drop of Isaac's blood was spilt, Jewish writings often speak *as if* it had actually been shed, because according to the Talmudic rule "there is no expiation without blood" (b. *Yoma* 5a).<sup>55</sup> The *Mekilta de Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai* (3<sup>rd</sup>–4<sup>th</sup> century AD) however affirms that Isaac actually gave a certain quantity of his blood on the altar, and God liberated the Israelites from the Egyptian captivity because of this spilled blood.<sup>56</sup> It is only one more step to state that Isaac truly died on the altar: on the mosaic of Bet Alpha representing resurrection a winged Isaac is floating above the altar, which means that he is already dead; according to *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer* 31<sup>57</sup> Isaac did truly die

<sup>50</sup> *Mekilta*, Pishā 7, quoted by Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection*, 180; cf. Vermes, "Redemption and Genesis XXII," 207.

<sup>51</sup> Cf. Vermes, "Redemption and Genesis XXII," 207. The midrash *Exodus Rabba* is probably quite late; it has been dated by modern scholars to the 10<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup> centuries, cf. Bakhos, "Midrash, Midrashim," 948.

<sup>52</sup> *Pesiqta de Rab Kahana*, Pishā 31(32), quoted by Vermes, "Redemption and Genesis XXII," 207; Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection*, 197. The *Pesiqta* dates from 500 to 700 AD, cf. Bakhos, "Midrash, midrashim," 948.

<sup>53</sup> Cf. Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection*, 182–83.

<sup>54</sup> Vermes, "Redemption and Genesis XXII," 208–9.

<sup>55</sup> Cf. Vermes, "Redemption and Genesis XXII," 205; cf. Heb 9.22.

<sup>56</sup> Wā'ērā 4, Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection*, 193.

<sup>57</sup> *PRE* is a relatively late midrash (8<sup>th</sup>–9<sup>th</sup> century) which draws on classical rabbinic material, cf. Bakhos, "Midrash, midrashim," 948.

and when the Lord declared: "Do not lay your hand on the boy..." his soul returned into his body. In this way, he acquired a direct experience of resurrection<sup>58</sup>; similarly in *Pesiqta de Rab Kahana*, according to which, as we have seen above, it was Isaac "who offered himself upon the altar." Several rabbinic texts speak of the "ashes of Isaac" without explaining what really happened and shrinking to represent Abraham as fulfilling the holocaust. A poem by Rabbi Ephraim of Bonn, written after the Second Crusade during which Jews were martyred in great number, makes even this final step:

He made haste, he pinned him down with his knees,  
 He made his two arms strong.  
 With steady hands he slaughtered him according to the rite,  
 Full right was the slaughter.

Down upon him fell the resurrecting dew, and he revived.  
 (The father) seized him (then) to slaughter once more.  
 Scripture, bear witness! Well-grounded is the fact:  
 And the Lord called Abraham, even a second time from heaven.<sup>59</sup>

This interpretation is naturally contrary to the Scripture; nonetheless, it corresponds perfectly to the twelfth-century Jewish reality where Jewish parents, imitating Abraham, killed their own children in order to avoid their forced Christianization. The martyr stories of these Jewish communities are often called the "Aqedahs."<sup>60</sup>

In these later texts according to which Isaac indeed dies (and resurrects) the parallel between Isaac and the martyr became complete.

Isaac thus became the prototype of the martyr and his death was considered as an expiatory sacrifice for the sins of others (in *LAB* for those of men in general and not only for the sins of Jews).

And here we arrive at a point which, as far as I know, has not received attention, though it seems to me quite significant, namely that in reality Isaac is no martyr in the strict sense of the word as we understood it at the beginning. He does not die for his faith, and nobody is compelling him to renounce

<sup>58</sup> Böttrich, Ego and Eißler, *Abraham in Judentum, Christentum und Islam*, 52–53.

<sup>59</sup> Quoted by Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection*, 198.

<sup>60</sup> Kessler, "Martyrdom," 286.

his religion; there is no situation of opposition and persecution; there is no expectation of vindication and reward beyond death. In whatever way the Aqedah is interpreted, it remains what it was in Gen 22: a human sacrifice in which the father immolates his son. This means that Isaac, the model of Jewish martyrology, is not a martyr, and neither is Jesus, the alleged model of Christian martyrs. We shall return to this question and examine in what measure Jesus does serve as a model in the Christian martyrs' acts.

*The best of human sacrifices: Philo, On Abraham 177–99*<sup>61</sup>

A curious passage in Philo is especially interesting for us, not only for the interpretation of Abraham's behavior but for the evaluation of human sacrifice in general.

Philo begins by stating that even if in the end Isaac was saved, Abraham's action was "complete and perfect" (177). But, continues Philo, there are some "quarrelsome critics" who did not value it highly enough and "say that many other persons, full of love for their kinsfolk and offspring, have given their children, some to be sacrificed for their country to serve as a price to redeem it from wars or drought or excessive rainfall or pestilence, others for the sake of what was held to be piety though it is not really so" (179). Then follow examples of human sacrifices among the Greeks and "the Barbarians." "Why, then, they ask, should we praise Abraham, as though the deed which he undertook was unprecedented, when private individuals and kings and whole nations do it when occasion calls?" (183) Philo in his reply declares that others sacrifice their children because of one of the following reasons: religious custom, or extreme danger (in these cases it often happens under compulsion), or just for the sake of glory (184–87). In the case of Abraham, however, none of these motifs was involved: where he lived, child sacrifices were not practiced; he had nothing to fear; there was no immediate danger; and he could expect no praise, because there were no witnesses to his act (188–90). Therefore it is clear that his deed "really deserves our praise and love" because 1. he acted purely out of obedience; 2. he inaugurated a totally new and extraordinary practice; 3. he did it in his old age; 4. he sacrificed not one of his many children but his only beloved son; 5. while other fathers in such situations remain at home or at least look away

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<sup>61</sup> English trans.: Philo vol. 6: *On Abraham. On Joseph. On Moses*, ed. and trans. Colson, 89–99.



while their child is immolated, Abraham himself began the sacrificial rite as a priest (191–98). “Perhaps, too,” adds Philo, “following the law of burnt offering, he would have dismembered his son and offered him limb by limb.” (198)<sup>62</sup> And he concludes: “Which of all the points mentioned is shared by others? Which does not stand by itself and defy description? Thus everyone who is not malignant or a lover of evil must be overwhelmed with admiration for his extraordinary piety ...” (199).

Though the text speaks for itself there are some points which deserve special attention:

- Philo does not condemn human sacrifice in general; though he knows that Moses called the burning of children an abomination (181), he praises those women in India who follow their dead husbands on the pyre (182), and it is quite natural for him that extreme danger can be averted only through human sacrifice (184).
- For him, the agreement (or disagreement) of the victim does not count; nowhere in the whole passage is there mention of Isaac’s obedience.
- He praises Abraham *because* of the inauguration of human sacrifice in Israel (which makes somewhat quaint the pious effort of modern biblical scholars to understand the Aqedah as a manifesto *against* human sacrifice).
- Philo summarizes quite clearly the possible reasons for human sacrifices and praises Abraham because in his case none of these reasons was present—in other words, he comes to the same conclusion we have arrived at, that Abraham’s deed had no reason at all (naturally, Philo does not put it so pat).

## CONCLUSIONS

Let us now summarize how a certain “ideology of martyrdom” came into being during the so-called intertestamental period.

Bergmann characterizes the situation in the following way: “After the return from the Babylonian exile all traces of ritualistic sacrifice of one’s children had been overcome; no new prophet was needed to preach against

<sup>62</sup> See the prescriptions concerning the burnt offering in Lev 1.3–10 (Lev 1.6: “The burnt offering shall be flayed and cut up into its parts”—we can be grateful that at least the flaying of the victim is not mentioned by Philo).

it. But the repressed returned in a no less horrifying form—the glorification of martyrdom. In this new guise the sacrifice of children had the full approval of both Jewish and Christian cultures.”<sup>63</sup>

The great merit of Bergmann is to recognize the connection between human sacrifice and martyrdom, but his statement needs some corrections. First, as seen in chapter 1, Trito-Isaiah reproaches the Israelites for the slaughter of their children (57.5), and if we accept that this reflects the real life of the community before the reform of Esdras and Nehemiah, then it follows that child sacrifice was practiced even after the captivity, as late as the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE. But at least we can be assured that after the reform no such sacrifices were practiced. Second, not only child sacrifices but many other forms of human sacrifice (or rather the narratives reporting human sacrifices) contributed to the formation of Jewish martyrology, and beside them also stories about noble death and heroic death for one’s country. We have endeavored to follow as closely as possible how these different elements found their ways into early Jewish martyr stories.

Under Hellenistic influence sacrificial ideology becomes transformed: the human sacrifices of the OT are changed into voluntary sacrifices, into heroic deeds undertaken for the (present or future, concrete or eschatological) salvation of Israel or even humankind as a whole. It is important to emphasize that this change takes place under the influence of classical (mostly Greek) ideas concerning the heroic death of some individual for the sake of the community as it is represented first of all in the tragedies of Euripides. We have seen how Jephthah’s daughter and Isaac began to behave in the manner of Euripidean heroes. This ideology influenced Maccabean martyrology as well: the Jews killed under Antiochus Epiphanes considered themselves (or rather were considered by Jewish hagiographers) as voluntary sacrifices offered to expiate the sins of the people and thus to stop the devastations of divine wrath.

Through the example of Isaac, and in a lesser degree that of Jephthah’s daughter, we could see how human sacrificial victims became martyrs. Isaac’s death is the prototype of every sacrifice and it has an expiatory effect for practically all the sins of Israel. It seems that by the beginning of the Christian era Judaism attributed an expiatory power to the suffering and the death of the righteous.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Bergmann, *In the Shadow of Moloch*, 106; cf. above Introd., 4.

<sup>64</sup> We have not treated the *Testament of Benjamin* 3.8 because it is almost certainly a Christian addition.

However, there are still some points which remain to be elucidated.

Although both Isaac and Jephthah's daughter are heroes and martyrs, the judgement passed on their fathers is totally different. In both cases the father is willing to kill his child (in the case of Abraham the beloved one, in the case of Jephthah the only one), one of them because of a totally incomprehensible divine command, the other because of a vow made to God for the deliverance of the Israelites. Jephthah actually kills his daughter, Abraham is prevented from killing his son at the last moment. From an ethical point of view we might ask ourselves which of them acted in a more correct way. But Jewish tradition (just as later on Christian tradition) never poses such questions: while it condemns Jephthah for his hasty vow, Abraham's prestige is such that nobody dares reflect on the rightness of his behavior. (There are numerous texts, Jewish and Christian as well, which seek to analyze the thoughts and feelings of Abraham, but not one of them ever questions the rightness of his readiness to offer his son). This immense prestige hindered and still hinders an unprejudiced evaluation of the Aqedah—thus placing a huge burden on Christianity as well as on Judaism, since Gen 22 not only legitimizes human sacrifice, but even presents it as a model to imitate (as actually happened during the Second Crusade).

In the previous chapter we have seen that when sacrifice becomes "voluntary" the victim begins to have his own point of view and hopes to receive something in return for giving his life. This is true for the heroes of early Judaism also. The righteous in the Wisdom of Solomon will dwell in eternal bliss with God, the Maccabean martyrs at the resurrection will receive back intact their tortured and mutilated bodies, and perhaps even Isaac is recompensed for his obedience by eternal life ("...inherit life without limit and time without measure," *LAB* 32.2).<sup>65</sup>

Another point to be mentioned is the role played by the different protagonists of the drama. In the case of human sacrifice the situation is clear: the sacrificer is someone qualified for the task (priest, king, diviner or the father of the victim), the victim plays no active role in the drama and the addressee is the divinity who for some reason has required this supreme offering. In the case of the martyr considered as voluntary sacrifice the situation is much less clear. The addressee remains God, who can be appeased only through the shedding of human blood; here, nothing has changed. The victim, however,

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<sup>65</sup> See the interpretation of Grappe and Marx, *Sacrifices scandaleux*, 114–15.

now plays the central role: he has the free choice to accept death or to escape it at the price of some compromise (which he never does, naturally, at least in the martyr accounts); he delivers long speeches in which he elaborates on his situation, explains his reasons for accepting death, magnifies God and threatens his executors with divine vengeance. But what happened to the sacrificer? The executioner has replaced the priest, and even if he is only fulfilling the divine will he is the incarnation of the powers of evil fighting against God and the "righteous." This is particularly interesting in the case of the Aqedah: if Isaac is considered as a martyr, then has Abraham taken the place of the executioner? Naturally nobody ever dared to affirm anything so appalling, even if the analogy presents itself quite readily (especially for those texts according to which Isaac actually died). Or perhaps it is of no importance who actually kills the victim, because this latter offers himself willingly? But then, is it not a suicide? We have insisted on this problem because it will arise in an even more marked form in connection with the death of Christ and with the deaths of the Christian martyrs.

We have remarked on the importance of suffering in the accounts of the Maccabean martyrs: the martyr does not die in a swift and relatively painless manner as the victims of the above mentioned (voluntary or not voluntary) sacrifices did; on the contrary, before dying he is required to suffer long and horribly. Unfortunately we are in the dark as to the historical facts concerning the deaths of the Maccabean martyrs. It is possible that they were indeed executed and even tortured, but we can have some doubts as to the veracity of these accounts. 1 Macc does not even refer to them as martyrs while the stories of 4 Macc. fully surpass in horror those of 2 Macc, which makes us suspect that as time went on tortures multiplied in the phantasy of the pious authors. But it is impossible to pronounce an unambiguous judgement about this. If the tortures were real, we can readily understand that it was necessary to find some way to explain them. If they were not real, or only partly, we have to suppose that there was, at least in some Jewish circles, a certain predilection for suffering (or rather for its description) based on a positive evaluation of it as appears in some later OT passages. The martyr's sacrifice is the more valuable the more he suffers, and this suffering too, and not only his death, has an expiatory effect.

As previously mentioned, it is a commonplace in works about human sacrifice that the acceptance or rejection of the practice constitutes the borderline between the civilized and the barbaric world. So far I have tried to show that the actual attitude of the classical world toward it was much more

complicated and, above all, deeply hypocritical. The same was true for the OT, which condemned human sacrifice in general as an “abomination” of the nations but accepted and even praised it in concrete cases. Turning to early Judaism, we might expect to find the same attitude. In fact, however, the authors of this period seem to display an even greater tolerance toward human sacrifices than their predecessors did. We can hardly find any passages condemning them: Wis 14.23 mentions the killing of children among the ignominies attached to idolatry but does not consider it any worse than the “celebration of secret mysteries” and “frenzied revels.” Josephus reproaches Jephthah for not paying attention to what people will say about his deed but exalts Abraham for a similar deed. Philo mentions that Moses called the burning of children as practiced by pagan nations an abomination (*On Abraham* 181); but the same Philo is convinced that certain critical situations can only be resolved through sacrificing human beings and praises Abraham for having introduced this custom in Israel. This shows that a highly cultivated Jew in the early first century found nothing at all repulsive in human sacrifice; on the contrary, he found it natural and sometimes even praiseworthy. Similarly, for Josephus and Pseudo-Philo human sacrifices are “normal” elements of religious practice. It seems that the case of the Aqedah, a human sacrifice legitimated by God and by the whole Jewish tradition made impossible the categorical condemnation of human sacrifice and led to the development of a quite tolerant or even positive attitude toward it.

Throughout this chapter we have observed the close relationship between sacrifice and martyrdom. Early Jewish martyrs are depicted as sacrifices and in Judaism this remains the dominant paradigm later on as well.<sup>66</sup> There is no question of a cosmic battle, neither is the martyr’s death conceived as a victory over the devil and his hosts. It is true that the Maccabean martyrs, by their courage and endurance, are victorious over the tyrant,<sup>67</sup> but this remains strictly an earthly combat; otherworldly forces are not involved, neither angels nor demons. In later Judaism martyrdom is called *qiddush hash-shem*, sanctification/glorification of the Name; pious Jews accept death for the glory of God. And it is not their task to defeat the evil forces; the cosmic battle is waged by God.

<sup>66</sup> Concerning later Jewish martyrology see e.g. Kanarfogel, “Martyrium II,” 203–7; Dan, “Martyr VI. Judaism,” 104–5.

<sup>67</sup> Cf. van Henten, “Martyrium II,” col. 311.



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## The Death of Jesus

Faith in the redeeming and expiatory sacrifice of Christ constitutes the foundation of the Christian religion: Jesus Christ is the Savior who, with the sacrifice of his death, redeemed humanity. If, however, we seek to understand the exact meaning of this statement we face several problems. It is not our purpose here to resolve the theological difficulties concerning the redemptive death of Christ, neither shall we attempt to treat the immense literature written upon this topic. We shall merely review in brief the paradigms (both OT and classical) by which the NT authors interpreted Jesus' death as a sacrifice and at the same time call attention to the problems raised by interpretations of this nature.

### THE DEATH OF THE HISTORICAL JESUS

Jesus, as we know, died for political reasons: he was condemned to death by the Romans, even if the instigation came from the Jews. The Roman authorities considered his activities as dangerous and threatening to the social order, so they acted in a rapid and determined manner, as they usually did in such cases. The condemnation of Jesus did not come about for religious reasons, and Pilate (like all the Roman procurators) was not in the least interested in the religious quarrels of the Jews. During the trial there is only one point he seeks to establish (which has nothing to do with religious convictions): whether Jesus is the king of the Jews or not. It is quite evident that if someone declares himself to be the king of the Jews, or he is declared by others to be so, this constitutes a revolt against Roman power. We have seen above

that it is often difficult to distinguish between human sacrifice, ritual murder, vengeance or execution as punishment for a crime. In this respect, however, the case of Jesus is quite simple: from the Roman point of view, the condemnation and execution of Jesus have no religious connotations.

It is not clear how Jesus himself understood his imminent death. It seems quite possible that he realized the dangers which threatened him in pursuing his calling and he perhaps even identified himself with the suffering Righteous One. We shall not examine whether he applied Isa 53 to himself or not,<sup>1</sup> but we need to be clear that this has nothing to do with the question of his Messianic consciousness. It is now generally accepted, despite numerous attempts to prove the contrary, that in the Judaism of Jesus' time the idea of a suffering and dying Messiah cannot be found. This means that even if Jesus had a Messianic consciousness (which is not at all certain), suffering and death did not figure among his Messianic tasks.

But we are interested first and foremost in the interpretation(s) of Jesus' death given by his followers. Moreover, according to the view of the NT authors Jesus' death cannot be separated from his resurrection; but we shall direct our attention only to his death, and first and foremost to its sacrificial character.

The central topic of our investigation is martyrdom as sacrifice, and we shall therefore treat the interpretation of Jesus' death only in connection with this: how are the ancient paradigms reflected in this interpretation, and in what measure does it constitute (if indeed it does) the foundation of Christian martyrology? The resurrection of Christ will be left out of our considerations, because neither are the victims of ancient human sacrifices resuscitated, nor the heroes who voluntarily offered themselves to die, nor the Christian martyrs. For the same reason we shall completely disregard the paradigm of dying and resuscitating gods, even if it probably contributed in no small degree to the formation of christology; in any case, the death of these divinities has nothing to do with expiation.<sup>2</sup>

The NT authors had no easy task when they sought to give religious meaning to the death of Jesus. In fact, it did not fit any of the former paradigms we have surveyed thus far.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Sabourin, "Sacrifice," col. 1520–21.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Seeley, *The Noble Death*, 81–82.



Jesus' death was not a human sacrifice, either voluntary, or forced. Neither was it martyrdom in the sense of the word as we understand it<sup>3</sup>: Jesus was not condemned because of his religious convictions and nobody sought to force him into apostasy. His silence and passivity before Pilate and during the whole trial process does not resemble in anything the arrogant and provocative behavior of the Maccabean martyrs (nor that of the future Christian martyrs) and his prayer in the garden of Gethsemane turns him straightforwardly into an anti-martyr. It is interesting to see how the evangelists recount the scene before Pilate. While the synoptic gospels relate that to the question of Pilate: "Are you the King of the Jews?" he answers only: "You say so" and nothing else (Mt 27.11–14; Mk 15.1–5; Lk 23.3,9), in John he becomes much more active: he in turn questions Pilate and explains to him the meaning of his mission in terms which the other, for obvious reasons, could not understand (Jn 18.33–38). Jesus begins here to show the comportment of a martyr, even if his behavior remains very far from their aggressiveness and arrogance.

It is evident that Jesus is neither a hero who goes to his death voluntarily in order to save others (at least not from an earthly danger as it was the case with the ancient Greek and Roman heroes). The paradigm which perhaps fits him the best is that of the philosopher who calmly accepts pain and death in order to remain faithful to his convictions, and it is not without reason that his death was often compared to that of Socrates. But there is an important question which has to be asked: was the death of Jesus voluntary or not? Could he have escaped from it by assuring Pilate that he had no political ambitions at all? Probably not. While Socrates could have saved his life (at the price of some compromise) Jesus had probably no choice; his courage consisted mainly in accepting the inevitable with dignity. Naturally, he was certainly aware throughout of the dangers his activities posed and from this point of view we can say that he freely accepted these risks.

We shall now examine how the NT authors used and transformed the paradigms and examples they found at their disposal in order to explain the death of Jesus.

First we shall summarize how the OT sacrifices were connected to Jesus' death, and then examine what paradigms of voluntary death and suffering could have contributed to the formation of christology.

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<sup>3</sup> Bergmann formulates it very clearly: "Historically the crucifixion was not a voluntary form of martyrdom but an execution forced upon Jesus by the Romans," *In the Shadow of Moloch*, 140.

## CHRIST AS GUILT-OFFERING

In the OT *āšām* (אֲשָׁם), ‘guilt-offering,’ is normally a ram offered to remedy mostly minor and often involuntary faults and impurities. The ritual and the special cases in which this sort of sacrifice is needed are regulated in Lev (cf. 5; 6.10; 7; 14; 19.21,22).<sup>4</sup> In Isa 53.10 this expression appears in connection with the Suffering Servant,<sup>5</sup> and because the latter was identified already from very early on with Jesus (perhaps even by Jesus himself), the suffering and death of Jesus were considered as guilt-offerings for the sins of men. As it is expressed in 1 Cor 15.3: “Christ died for our sins,” cf. Acts 5.31; Rom 4.25.

In Isa 53.10 the LXX translates *āšām* by *περὶ ἁμαρτίας*,<sup>6</sup> ‘sin-offering’ and for all the other occurrences of the term it uses similar expressions: (τὰ) *περὶ/ὑπὲρ ἁμαρτίας* or less frequently (τὰ) *περὶ/ὑπὲρ πλημμελείας*. In the NT we find the same expression, cf. e.g. Heb 5.1; 10.6,8,18 (cf. Gal 1.4). Probably Rom 8.3 must also be understood in this way: “...by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and as a sin offering.”<sup>7</sup>

## CHRIST AS RANSOM

Mk 10.45 (and parallel Mt 20.28) likewise make use of Isa 53.10, but with certain modifications: “For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his soul<sup>8</sup> as a ransom for many (δοῦναι τὴν ψυχὴν αὐτοῦ λύτρον ἀντὶ πολλῶν).”<sup>10</sup>

Note, first, that “guilt-offering” is replaced by “ransom” (λύτρον), which has a totally different connotation: λύτρον means first of all the money by which the freedom of a slave can be bought. The Septuagint never translates *āšām* by this term, which is not part of sacrificial terminol-

<sup>4</sup> See above, ch. 1, 24.

<sup>5</sup> Though the Masoretic text probably did not mean that the Suffering Servant himself was the guilt-offering, see above, ch. 1, 27.

<sup>6</sup> I.e. (δῶρον) *περὶ ἁμαρτίας*.

<sup>7</sup> NRSV translates: “...and to deal with sin,” and in the notes gives our translation as another possibility, cf. Sabourin, “Sacrifice,” col. 1518.

<sup>8</sup> I.e. “his life.”

<sup>9</sup> In this case ἀντὶ means “for” and not “instead of.”

<sup>10</sup> We shall not treat the question whether this verse is ancient or shows the influence of Paul.

ogy. Lohse argues for the Palestinian origin of Mk 10.45 and declares that its meaning is the same as that of Isa 53. Even if our phrase probably was influenced by the Suffering Servant motif, the term “ransom” evokes Hellenistic ideas, and we cannot help thinking of the passage of Philo of Byblos preserved by Eusebius and quoted above according to which in great crises children were sacrificed “as a ransom to the avenging demons...”<sup>11</sup> In this passage ransom means human sacrifice (and nothing indicates that it had to be voluntary), and the victims are not the “Righteous” but the children of the nobles and rulers of the city. The ransom is paid in order to avert some very concrete danger and, another interesting detail, those who receive it are the avenging demons. Naturally, it was quite easy to connect these Hellenistic ideas with the Jewish notion of the Righteous One suffering for the sins of others.

Second, in Isa 53.10 it is not clear who it is who makes the guilt-offering; in Mk 10.45, however, it is the Son who gives himself as ransom for the others. This inevitably raises the question: to whom does he give the ransom? To God or Satan? Lohse goes as far as to remark that the question remains insoluble, but he attributes this to the deficiency of the image.<sup>12</sup> The logical answer would be that he pays the ransom to the powers of darkness (see the “avenging demons” of Philo of Byblos), and early Church fathers effectively understood Mk 10.45 in this way. “But to whom did he give his soul as a ransom for many?” asks Origen. And replays: “Surely not to God. Could it then be to the Evil One? For he had us in his power, until the ransom (λύτρον) for us should be given to him, even the life (or soul) of Jesus...”<sup>13</sup> The clearest explanation is given perhaps by Gregory of Nyssa: “The case was similar, when we of our own freewill had sold ourselves, and God in his goodness would restore us again to freedom. There was a necessity for him not to proceed by way of force, but to accomplish our deliverance in a lawful way. It consists in this that the owner is offered all that he asks as the redemption-price (λύτρον) of his property.”<sup>14</sup> Gregory’s interpretation is based on the original meaning of *lutron* as the money by which the freedom

<sup>11</sup> Eusebius, *Praeparatio Evangelica* 1.10.44, see above, ch. 2, 56.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Lohse, *Märtyrer und Gottesknecht*, 121, n. 3; Sabourin, “Sacrifice,” 1515.

<sup>13</sup> Origen, *Commentarium in evangelium Matthaei* 16.8, quoted by Aulén, *Christus Victor*, 49.

<sup>14</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *Oratio catechetica magna* 22, quoted by Aulén, *Christus Victor*, 49.

of a slave can be bought. The idea that the ransom was paid to the evil forces (or to death) was however not unanimously accepted; Gregory of Nazianzus rejects the notion of ransom altogether and prefers to use that of sacrifice while others affirm that the ransom was paid to God.<sup>15</sup> As we see it is not easy to decide who the addressee of the ransom could be.

Third, we should note the universalism of Mk 10.45. In Isa 53 the Servant's fate only refers to Israel ("he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities," 53.5), 1 Cor 5.3, too, has "our sins" (probably in the same sense as Isa 53) and Acts 5.31 clearly speaks of Israel. In Mk 10.45, on the contrary, Christ gives himself "for many" (ἀντὶ πολλῶν), in other words, for everybody. As it is evident in 1 Tim 2.5–5: "...Christ Jesus, himself a human, who gave himself a ransom for all (ὁ δοὺς ἑαυτὸν ἀντίλυτρον ὑπὲρ πάντων)." This verse paraphrases Mk 10.45, replacing Semitic notions by their Hellenistic equivalents: "a human" instead of "the Son of Man," "gave himself" instead of "to give his soul," and "for all" instead of "for many."<sup>16</sup> The term ἀντίλυτρον has the same meaning as λύτρον but it evokes the ἀντίψυχον of 4 Macc. 6.29; 17.22, used to express that the death of the martyr is a substitute for others. We have to refrain from attributing any influence of 4 Macc. on 1 Tim, because, as we have seen above, the dating of the former is quite uncertain.<sup>17</sup>

## ATONEMENT, SACRIFICE OF ATONEMENT

(ἱλαστήριον, ἱλασμός)

Rom 3.25 reads: "...whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement (ἱλαστήριον) by his blood ..." In the Septuagint *hilastērion* means 'mercy seat' and corresponds to the Hebrew *kapporet*, deriving from the verb *kipper*, 'cover over, pacify, propitiate'<sup>18</sup>—either because it was used in the ritual of atonement, or because it covered the Ark of the Covenant (Ex 25.21; 37.6).<sup>19</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Aulén, *Christus Victor*, 36–55.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Lohse, *Märtyrer und Gottesknecht*, 119.

<sup>17</sup> In Rom 3.23 ἀπολύτρωσις does not mean the paying of a ransom but deliverance, the remission of sins, see Lohse, *Märtyrer und Gottesknecht*, 149; ἀπολύτρωσις, in Bauer, *Wörterbuch zum NT*, 190–91.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Gesenius and Robinson, *A Hebrew and an English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 497.

<sup>19</sup> Sabourin, "Sacrifice," col. 1522.

The mercy seat was in the Holy of Holies where the high priest once a year performed the rite of atonement. He entered and sprinkled the blood of a bull before the mercy seat, thus making atonement of his own sins, and then the blood of a goat as atonement for the sins of the people of Israel (Lev 16.11–17).

The interpretation of *hilastērion* in Rom 3.25 is far from easy: Jesus cannot be identified with the mercy seat because he is the victim whose blood is sprinkled before it.<sup>20</sup> Thus the translation of NRSV, ‘sacrifice of atonement,’ is justified, even if earlier *hilastērion* does not seem to have this meaning. Probably we do not have to push very far the analogy with Lev 16 and the best solution would be perhaps to render *hilastērion* as ‘instrument of atonement,’ as Sabourin has proposed,<sup>21</sup> because divine pardon is obtained through the intermediary of Christ. As we saw above, *4 Macc.* applies the term *hilastērion* to the martyrs.

1 Jn twice uses the term *hilasmos* for Jesus, translated by NRSV as ‘atoning sacrifice’: “...and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world” (2.2); “... he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins” (4.10). In Hebrew *ḥaṭṭā’t*, ‘sin-offering, expiatory offering,’ designates a certain kind of sacrifice mentioned in Lev 7.37, which is not identical with *āšām*, ‘guilt-offering,’ likewise mentioned in the same verse.<sup>22</sup> In Ezek 44.27 the Septuagint translates this word by *hilasmos*. Thus 1 Jn connects the death of Jesus with this type of sacrifice.

1 Jn 4.10 shows strong similarities with Rom 8.3, from which it follows that for the author of 1 Jn ‘guilt-offering’ ([*ta*] *peri hamartias*) and ‘sin-offering’ (*hilasmos*) were practically the same.

## THE BLOOD OF CHRIST

Christ died in a very painful but not especially bloody way, so those verses of the NT (and they are quite numerous) which refer to the blood of Christ do so in order to emphasize the sacrificial character of his death. As Heb 9.22 states

<sup>20</sup> See the very thorough treatment of the problem by Lohse, *Märtyrer und Gottesknecht*, 149–54.

<sup>21</sup> Sabourin, “Sacrifice,” col. 1522.

<sup>22</sup> See above, ch. 1, 24.

(in harmony with Jewish tradition)<sup>23</sup>: "... under the law almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins." Thus, according to Rom 5.9, "...we have been justified by his blood"<sup>24</sup>; according to Col 1.20, God reconciled himself "by making peace through the blood of his cross"; Eph 1.7: "In him we have redemption through his blood..."; in Rev 7.14 the chosen ones wash their robes in the blood of the Lamb etc., and Heb equally makes ample use of this expression.<sup>25</sup>

For our purpose those passages are of especial interest in which the blood of Christ is connected to the new covenant, as e.g. 1 Cor 11.25: "This cup is the new covenant of my blood," cf. Lk 22.20 (in Mk 14.24 "of the covenant" is probably a later addition) and in 1 Pet 1.2, too, "to be sprinkled with his blood" refers to the concluding of a new covenant. Heb 13.20 speaks of "the blood of the eternal covenant."

The background to this image is constituted by Ex 24.3–8: as the first covenant had been concluded by sacrificial blood, so too was the new one. In Ex 24.6–8 the people of Israel immolated oxen as a "peace-offering" and Moses put half of the blood in basins and with the other half he besprinkled the altar. This means that the death of Christ was connected with this kind of sacrifice, too.

## CHRIST AS THE LAMB

The identification of Christ with the Paschal Lamb goes back to very early times, as is proved by Paul's words in 1 Cor 5.7: "For our Paschal Lamb, Christ, has been sacrificed." In this verse Paul does not use the Greek term for 'lamb' (ἀμνός); instead he simply calls Christ 'our *paskha*'.

In the NT Jesus is described four times as the Lamb (ἀμνός).<sup>26</sup> In Acts Philip instructs the Ethiopian eunuch by quoting Isa 53.7–8: "Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter, and like a lamb silent before its shearer, so he does not open his mouth" (8.32). The fact that Philip bases his teach-

<sup>23</sup> See above, chs. 1 and 3 (in connection with Isaac).

<sup>24</sup> Paul found the expression "blood of Christ" probably in an already existing tradition. This term, which is very important for him, designates the redemptive death of Christ, cf. Sabourin, "Sacrifice," col. 1518–19.

<sup>25</sup> See in detail: Lohse, *Märtyrer und Gottesknecht*, 138–41; 176–77; Sabourin, "Sacrifice," col. 1522–23; 1532–33.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Gess, "Lamb, Sheep," 411.

ing about Jesus on this verse proves that this comparison was central for the understanding of Jesus' earthly mission. According to 1 Pet 1.19 humans were ransomed "with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without defect or blemish." In both verses Jesus is *compared* to a lamb (just as the Servant is in Isa 53.7) whereas the Gospel of John *identifies* him with it. At the beginning of the Gospel John the Baptist greets Jesus with the well-known words: "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (Jn 1.29; cf. 1.36). This motif is especially important for John: the description of Jesus' death also contains several allusions to the offering of the lamb: he is crucified on the day of Preparation for Passover (19.14,31) and his bones were not broken (19.36; cf. Ex 12.46; Num 9.12). Revelation, a book of Johannine inspiration, presents Christ as the Lamb slaughtered for the redemption of men (ch. 5). In this passage the term used for 'lamb' is not ἀμνός but ἀρνίον.

In the identification of Christ with a lamb we can distinguish three different aspects: the patient bearing of his suffering; the perfection of his sacrifice; and the atoning power of his death.<sup>27</sup>

The real problem is posed by this third aspect: it is not clear how an atoning value could be attributed to a lamb. As atoning sacrifices the OT prescribes mostly goats, in some cases a bull, but never lambs. These latter are used as daily offerings (cf. Ex 29.42). Lambs are also sacrificed if someone is to be purified from leprosy, but this does not mean that any purifying power was attributed to lambs. The Paschal Lamb had originally only prophylactic character (the houses marked by its blood were spared during the tenth plague [death of the firstborn] in Egypt), but very soon it became considered as a genuine sacrifice.

We need not enter into the exegetical problems of Jn 1.29, and it is secondary to our purpose whether the interpretation of the Aqedah (Isaac as prototype of the Easter Lamb) played any role in it. The fact that Christ died at Passover combined with Isa 53.6–7 could easily lead to the identification of Christ with the Paschal Lamb, and as the blood of the latter saved the sons of Israel in Egypt, in the same way the blood of the eschatological lamb, the Christ, will save men. And as the Suffering Servant "bore the sin of many" so Christ "takes away the sin of the world" (Jn 1.29).

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<sup>27</sup> Cf. *ibid.*

## CHRIST AS FRAGRANT OFFERING

Eph 5.2 calls Christ a “fragrant offering” (εἰς ὀσμὴν εὐδίας) which corresponds to the Hebrew *qetoret*, ‘sweet smoke of sacrifice’ or ‘incense’ (cf. Gen 8.21; Ex 28.19; Lev 1.9,13 etc.).

## CHRIST AS THE ONE AND ONLY ETERNAL SACRIFICE (HEB)

The Letter to the Hebrews describes Christ as the High Priest who offers himself as unique sacrifice. The author of the letter uses the sacrificial terminology of the OT in a rather non-conventional way: the sacrifice of Christ is not identified with any special types of sacrifices practiced in the temple ritual, but constitutes rather the quintessence of all.<sup>28</sup> Heb 9 describes the ritual of expiation as it was performed by the High Priest on the Day of Atonement when he (only on that occasion in the year) entered the Holy of Holies (cf. 9.7,11,25). But the sacrifice of Christ corresponds also to the daily sacrifice of the temple cult (cf. 5.1–3; 8.3; 10.11), and his death is connected also to the covenant-offering (cf. 8.15–23). Thus, for the author of Hebrews, Christ in his death accomplished all the OT sacrifices and made them superfluous once and for all.

## JESUS AND ISAAC

As we have seen, the authors of the New Testament writings referred practically all the types of Old Testament sacrifices to Jesus. These naturally involved animal sacrifices (as e.g. the lamb) or even a fragrant offering; but the question remains whether the New Testament authors connected Jesus’ death in any way to human sacrifices.

According to Lohse, human sacrifice has to be distinguished from expiatory death. The former was connected to the cult of the divinities of nature and, as such, it was for Israel strictly prohibited. Anyway “in late Judaism this problem was not current anymore.”<sup>29</sup> Even if human sacrifices were known to the Greeks and Romans, as Israel had always condemned them, Lohse argues, there can be no connection between them and Jewish ideas concerning the redemptive value of death.<sup>30</sup> In the previous chapters we have

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<sup>28</sup> Cf. Young, “Opfer IV,” in *TRE* 25, 273.

<sup>29</sup> Lohse, *Märtyrer und Gottesknecht*, 95.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Lohse, *Märtyrer und Gottesknecht*, 96.



seen how ambiguous was the attitude of the OT toward human sacrifices and we have also remarked that because of the Aqedah Jewish tradition was unable to rid itself of a certain admiration for human sacrifices (see the passage from Philo's *On Abraham* discussed above).

In the fourth edition of *RGG* Knöppler notes that Rom 8.32 and Jn 3.16 have been interpreted by a number of scholars in terms of human sacrifice, but he argues against such an interpretation, declaring that the New Testament never mentions any human sacrifices. This is, however, evading the problem.<sup>31</sup> The two verses in question run as follows: "He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up (παρέδωκεν) for all of us..." (Rom 8.32); "For God so loved the world that he gave (ἔδωκεν) his only Son..." (Jn 3.16), which is to say that God assumed the role of Abraham, while no mention is made of Isaac's obedience. At this point, however, we are faced with a new problem. In the case of Abraham it is clear that he offered his son to God. But if God takes the place of Abraham, to whom did he offer his son? To himself? Indeed, the same problem emerges in connection with all New Testament verses where it is said that God gives (up) or offers Jesus.<sup>32</sup>

The sacrifice of Isaac therefore constitutes a clear link between the death of Jesus and human sacrifice, just as in Judaism it was the link between martyrdom and human sacrifice.

We shall now examine in what measure the paradigms presented in the previous chapters could have influenced the interpretation of the death of Christ.

## THE SUFFERING SERVANT

It is clear that Isa 53 contributed in a large measure to the explanation of the vicarious and redemptive character of Christ's suffering and death. Even though Judaism, as far as we know, did not interpret this passage in this way, it is evident that it fitted perfectly to such a kind of exegesis.

<sup>31</sup> Knöppler, "Menschenopfer," col. 1088.

<sup>32</sup> I am naturally not the first one to remark on this problem. Sabourin struggles with it without arriving at any solution, "Sacrifice," col. 1515; Halbertal, *On Sacrifice*, 124, n. 33 merely alludes to it. The subject is treated in detail by Kimberley Christine Patton, *Religion of the Gods: Ritual, Paradox, and Reflexivity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 240–47 (quoted by Halbertal, *ibid.*).

It is quite possible that Jesus himself understood his mission in the terms of Isa 53: verses such as Mk 10.45 or Lk 22.37 (“For I tell you, this scripture must be fulfilled in me, ‘And he was counted among the lawless’ [Isa 53.12]; and indeed what is written about me is being fulfilled”) may be authentic.<sup>33</sup>

## THE MACCABEAN MARTYRS

We have identified some remarkable similarities between certain passages of the NT and the Maccabean martyrology. The most important among them is the idea of “dying for,” which was totally absent from Judaism before the first century BCE. We do not have to suppose the influence of *4 Macc.* on NT authors because, as we have argued in the preceding chapter, already 2 Macc attributes an expiatory value to the death of the martyrs.

## THE “NOBLE DEATH” OF THE PHILOSOPHER

Seeley sought to demonstrate that Paul’s theology of redemption is determined in a certain degree by the classical tradition of “noble death.” As we saw in chapter 2, Seeley distinguishes five characteristic features of noble death—obedience (to philosophy), the overcoming of physical vulnerability, a military setting, vicariousness (being beneficial for others) and sacrificial metaphors,<sup>34</sup> and comes to the conclusion that in the Pauline writings the noble death of the philosopher-martyr is closer to the description of Jesus’ death than the Maccabean martyr stories are. We shall not enter into the details of this thesis, I merely wish to remark that even if Paul could have been influenced by the idea of noble death there is a very important difference between the latter and the Pauline interpretation of Christ’s death, namely that noble death benefits others only as an example, and the philosopher never dies for others. If we seek classical parallels, we have to turn our sights in other directions.

## HEROIC DEATH AND VOLUNTARY SACRIFICE

In the preceding chapter I tried to show that Maccabean martyrology was influenced in a great measure by Greek ideas concerning heroic death and

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<sup>33</sup> Cf. Sabourin, “Sacrifice,” col. 1520–21.

<sup>34</sup> Seeley, *The Noble Death*, 13, see above 57–58.

the voluntary sacrifice of some individual for the sake of others. These ideas are to be found first in the tragedies of Euripides, but by the time the books of the Maccabees were written they had already become the *topoi* of classical literature. It is quite possible that, on the one hand, this ideology could have influenced the NT writings through Maccabees (and it is not necessary to presume the influence of *4 Macc.* because the same ideas are present—though in a less pronounced way—in *2 Macc* also)<sup>35</sup>; on the other hand, NT authors themselves could have been acquainted with mythic and literary stories (which at that time were already very widespread) about voluntary death for the sake of others.

### FIRSTBORN SACRIFICES

Levenson derives the sacrifice of Christ from the (symbolic or real) firstborn sacrifices of the OT<sup>36</sup>; he considers the Aqedah also as such. He connects the Lamb of God in the NT with this motif because, according to him, it evokes the substitution of the firstborn by a lamb as it is prescribed in Ex 34.20. In the expression “my beloved Son” (Mk 1.11, cf. Mt 3.17; Lk 3.22; 2 Pet 1.17) he sees an allusion to Isaac.<sup>37</sup> We shall not enter into a detailed analysis and criticism of Levenson’s argument, which I cannot accept in its totality, even if his remarks concerning human sacrifices display unusual perspicacity. I only want to clarify certain points: 1. I do not see any connection between the Aqedah and firstborn sacrifices; the former constitutes a special case which cannot be attached to any other story of the OT; 2. I strongly doubt whether the Paschal Lamb or the “beloved Son” in Mk 1.11 (and parallels) has anything to do with Abraham’s sacrifice. Thus in my opinion there is no passage of the NT which could be attached with certainty to firstborn sacrifices. This, however, does not contradict the fact that the Aqedah, the

<sup>35</sup> Williams recognizes that classical ideas about the voluntary death of a noble person for the sake of others played an important role in the formation of the concept of Jesus’ death as a saving event, but argues that these ideas reached early Christianity via *4 Macc.* (*Jesus’ Death*, 232–54). His argument is based on the supposition that *4 Macc.* was composed at Antioch about 35–40 AD (*ibid.*, 253); this, however, seems quite questionable and the majority of scholars propose a much later date.

<sup>36</sup> Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection*, 200–19.

<sup>37</sup> He sees in Mark 9.7 (cf. Mt 17.5; Lk 9.35) an allusion to Joseph, whom he considers equally as a sacrificed and resurrected firstborn, *The Death and Resurrection*, 202.

only human sacrifice of the OT accepted without reserve overall in Judaism, contributed considerably to the understanding of Jesus' death.

Still, the great merit of Levenson is to connect Jesus' sacrificial death to the human sacrifices of the OT.

## DYING AND SUFFERING FOR CHRIST

Finally, as we are interested in martyrdom, we have to look briefly in the NT writings for its roots.<sup>38</sup> Stephen, according to Acts, is executed for Christ (ch. 7); James, Peter (Acts 12.1–3) and Paul have to suffer for him. Paul consciously accepts this suffering as a consequence of his calling (Rom 8.17; 1 Cor 4.9–13; 15.30–32 etc.).<sup>39</sup>

It is debatable whether Jesus himself requested the believers to follow him even unto death; still, several statements of the NT could be (and actually were) understood in this way. The most important such passages are Mk 8.34–38, with parallel Mt 16.24–27 (about taking up one's cross) and Mk 10.37–40 (about drinking Christ's cup and being baptized with the same baptism as Christ), while many other passages speak of suffering for Christ (cf. Mt 5.10; 10.17–39; Jn 15.18–21; 16.2; 1 Pet 2.21–25; 4.12–19). Those who suffer for Christ have to rejoice because they will be rewarded in heaven (Mt 5.11–12; 1 Pet 4.13). According to Rev the souls of those who were killed because of the word of the Lord repose beneath the heavenly altar (6.9–11); they will rise at the first resurrection and reign with Christ a thousand years (20.4–5). But we must not forget that in Mt 10.23 Jesus orders his disciples to flee before the persecution.

As I have argued earlier, Jesus was not a martyr in the sense of the word as we use it, neither was he considered as such by the NT writers. Rev 1.5 calls him "the faithful *martyr*," but those who have witnessed for Christ by their death are equally called by this name (Rev 2.13; 17.6). Whatever the exact meaning of 'martyr' in Rev may be, the fact that it was used both for Christ and for those who were put to death because of him made easier the identification of Christ as a martyr in the strict sense of the word.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Moss, *The Other Christs*, 19–53. See also the NT passages collected by Baumeister, *Genèse et évolution de la théologie du martyre*, 20–43 (textes n<sup>os</sup> 9–20).

<sup>39</sup> Slusser, "Martyrium III/1," in *TRE* 22, 208.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Moss, *The Other Christs*, 38.

## CONCLUSIONS

Jesus was a human being who, according to theological interpretation, was sacrificed or sacrificed himself. The difference between the two, as I have sought to argue, is not very great; a human sacrifice, even if voluntary, is still a human sacrifice. Further on, as it has been mentioned already several times, it is quite difficult to determine the exact meaning of ‘voluntariness.’ This holds true for the death of Christ also, and it is not clear whether we can call it voluntary at all; his last words according to Matthew 45.46 (“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”) rather suggest the contrary.

It is true that the NT never speaks of human sacrifices, but the sacrifice of Isaac constitutes the missing link between these and the sacrifice of Christ, cf. Rom 8.32; Jn 3.16 (as well as between human sacrifice and Jewish martyrology).

We examined earlier the Jewish and classical roots of the idea of vicarious death and we have seen the different opinions concerning the sacrifice of Christ. As to the latter, according to Lohse its origins reach back to Palestinian Judaism; according to Williams its interpretation was influenced by Greek tragedies and funeral orations through the intermediary of the books of the Maccabees,<sup>41</sup> while Levenson connects it with firstborn sacrifices. On the preceding pages I have tried to show how the different traditions and paradigms intermingled in the understanding of Christ’s death as a sacrifice, which also meant that the idea of Christ’s vicarious and redeeming death was comprehensible for both Jews and pagans alike. This was absolutely not the case with other theological ideas connected to Christ: Jesus as the ‘Messiah’ fulfilled none of the Jewish messianic expectations,<sup>42</sup> while for the pagans the notion itself was totally meaningless; whereas the divinity of Jesus was comprehensible and acceptable for the pagans, but to the Jews it was, on the contrary, pure blasphemy.

In order to redeem humanity Christ not only had to die, he also had to suffer; we speak of his “passion,” which means his suffering as well as his death. The followers of Christ (according to the general Christian convic-

<sup>41</sup> See note 35 above.

<sup>42</sup> From the huge literature written on this question see e.g.: Collins, *The Scepter and the Star*; Charlesworth, *The Messiah*.

tion) must participate in the suffering of Christ,<sup>43</sup> and, if necessary, also in his death. The martyr's death is the more valuable the more he suffers.

The NT presents the death of Jesus as the fulfillment and at the same time the end of the whole OT sacrificial cult. The notion of burnt offering (*holokautōma* or *holokarpōsis*), however, could not be used in his case because of the manner of his death. But as the burnt offering seems to be regarded as the summit of all sacrifices, on this point the martyrs could easily surpass Jesus.

Concerning the sacrificial terminology applied to Christ we have to ask ourselves whether these expressions are to be understood metaphorically or not. The death of Christ was not metaphorical but real, and it is understood as a real sacrifice and not a metaphorical one. Lohse remarks concerning Paul's theology that the images used by him can express the unintelligible only through similitudes which immediately burst their frameworks being unable to hold their content.<sup>44</sup> This is true for all the NT passages examined so far—the fundamental question being: who offered the sacrifice to whom? If Christ offers himself, the being to whom the sacrifice is offered is evidently God, as it is expressly stated in Heb 9.14. Naturally, we could go a step further and ask why God should demand such a sacrifice, and a good answer is not easy to come up with. On the other hand, what if it is God who gives his Son? Then to whom did he give him? To the devil, or to himself? To suppose the devil would mean that this latter is somehow superior to God, a sheer blasphemy if ever there was one, thus the only possible answer remains that God sacrificed his Son to himself.<sup>45</sup> According to several Christian authors the ransom (the life of Jesus) was paid to the devil; is it then possible that the same act (Jesus' death) should be understood at the same time as a ransom paid to the devil and as a sacrifice offered to God? We shall return to these questions when discussing the sacrifice of the martyrs.

There is, however, another point which as far as I know has hardly received any attention. Bergmann remarks concerning Christ as the Lamb of

<sup>43</sup> Cf. πάθημα, in Bauer, *Wörterbuch zum NT*, col. 1194–95.

<sup>44</sup> Lohse, *Märtyrer und Gottesknecht*, 161–62.

<sup>45</sup> C. Moss writes concerning the concept of “ransom” applied to the saving work of Christ: “The concept proves problematic for authors who debate to whom the ransom is paid; is it paid to the devil or to God? Aulén argues that in the classical theory of atonement God pays the ransom to himself out of love for humankind.” (*The Other Christs*, 100).

God that the “animal is replaced by a human victim”<sup>46</sup> and thus the “transition from firstborn to lamb is reversed: the son becomes the sacrifice once more.”<sup>47</sup> This is a very important statement, but we can go even further. As we have seen, the New Testament not only identified Jesus with a sacrificial animal (the lamb) but also applied to him a wide range of OT sacrificial terminology used for animal sacrifices. The death of Jesus is thus identified with the animal sacrifices of ancient Israelite cult practice (whether metaphorically or not is immaterial for us) and at the same time it supersedes them. The situation has completely turned. The Old Testament prophets did their best to put a stop to human sacrifices. The firstborn were not killed but redeemed, and in Gen 22 Isaac is finally replaced by a ram. The same trend asserts itself in the classical world, where human sacrifice is considered as barbarian and obsolete and a great number of myths relate how in the last moment the divinity himself replaced the human victim with an animal. But the contrary happened in the case of the sacrifice of Christ<sup>48</sup>: animal sacrifices were replaced by a human one, making the latter acceptable once again in the civilized world. It is interesting that Stroumsa does not bring himself to state this clearly. He remarks that Christianity, while rejecting the earlier forms of sacrifice, puts Jesus’ sacrifice in the centre of its theological system and thus re-establishes the importance of sacrifice, but he does not contend that we are dealing with a human sacrifice which paved the way to further human sacrifices.<sup>49</sup> Bergmann concludes: “In symbolic form, therefore, God once more accepted human sacrifice.” In my opinion, the sacrifice was not symbolic at all, but quite real: Jesus had to die, just as the martyrs also died a very real, and often very painful, death.

It is true that the death of Jesus was according to Christian theology the last of human sacrifices,<sup>50</sup> the one and unique sacrifice with an everlasting effect which has made all other sacrifices obsolete and superfluous (as it is expressly stated in Heb). This, however, remained a theory; in practice martyrs again and again had to sacrifice themselves following Christ, and every faithful Christian is expected to do so if necessary (later on, the sacrifice did

<sup>46</sup> Bergmann, *In the Shadow of Moloch*, 116.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

<sup>48</sup> As e.g. Euripides’ Iphigeneia; for other examples see Hengel, *The Atonement*, 29–30.

<sup>49</sup> Cf. Stroumsa, *The End of Sacrifice*, 72–73.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 73.

not need to be a bloody one; instead, a person could offer himself through asceticism and renunciation).

Jesus' death, as we have stated above, was an execution, a secular punishment decreed by the Roman authorities and carried out without any cultic framework. His followers, however, interpreted it as a voluntary sacrifice offered to God in order to redeem mankind; this interpretation was made possible through already existing paradigms (noble death, heroic death for the country, the Suffering Servant etc.). Thus a violent death could be interpreted as a cultic human sacrifice (just as it was in the case of the Maccabean martyrs), a fact which opened wide the door to all exaggerations (martyrs) and misuses (when rulers expect others to sacrifice themselves for some "holy" purpose).



## The Martyr's Sacrifice: Case Studies

### PRELIMINARY REMARKS

As I have stated before, we are interested in the relation of martyrdom to human sacrifice; so we shall now investigate which paradigms of human sacrifice were used by the hagiographers to describe and understand the martyr's death (I repeat again that we are not dealing with the historical facts themselves, but with their hagiographic descriptions and theological interpretations). As an aside, I want to challenge the well-established *topos* that martyrs are the imitators of Christ: even if they expressly declare themselves to be so, their behavior both before the tribunal and during their execution follows quite other models.

It is not evident whether or not Christ himself actually required his followers to die for him if necessary, but several of his statements could be (and were actually) understood in this way.<sup>1</sup> Euplus, who volunteered to be martyred, justifies his behavior by quoting before the tribunal Mt 5.10 and Mk 8.34.<sup>2</sup> Thus martyrs died in the conviction that martyrdom was expected of them.

But why are all these sacrifices necessary? We could answer that persecutions demanded victims and this led to the formation of the "sacrificial ideology", i.e. the conviction that Christians have to die for God. But perhaps the process went also the other way: Christians often became victims of

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. above ch. 4, 112.

<sup>2</sup> *Acts of Euplus*, Rec. B. (Latin) 1.15, in Musurillo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, 314.

the persecution *because* of their conviction to have to sacrifice themselves in order to become true followers of Christ.

According to traditional church history (based mainly on Eusebius) Christianity during the first three centuries of its existence lived under permanent persecutions from the part of the Romans; it was the “Church of the Martyrs.” It is now clear that this image is very far from reality. As Candida Moss convincingly argues, up to the time of Diocletian there were no centrally organized persecutions<sup>3</sup>; Christians were not persecuted for being Christians, but prosecuted from time to time for refusing to participate in Roman religious life. This holds also for the Decian “persecutions” which aimed at re-establishing the religious unity of the Roman Empire. During the first two centuries Christians were not sought out by the authorities; they were condemned only when denounced and they declared themselves Christians before the tribunal. Christians were doubtless not beloved by their “pagan” compatriots and local atrocities directed against them were probably quite common. It is understandable that in the face of these adversities Christians actually felt themselves persecuted and it is without doubt that a number of them suffered prison, exile and even death. Unfortunately it is impossible to determine this number with any exactitude, but probably it was very small in proportion to the vast majority of Christians who managed to survive the persecutions without harm. Another fact which we must not forget is that in many cases Christians gave themselves up to be martyred, at least according to the hagiographers. Among the 99 executed Christians treated by Eusebius in his *Palestinian Martyrs* there are only 16 persons about whom it is reported that they were sought out and arrested by the authorities. In all the other cases either the circumstances of their arrest are unknown or we learn that they turned themselves in.<sup>4</sup> The same is true for the other martyr acts: very often their protagonists clearly want to die and provoke the Romans in every possible way. Thus we must keep in mind that a great number of Christian martyrs died because they wanted to die. Naturally we can never know exactly what any particular martyr wanted or did or said; we only know what the hagiographer makes him want or do or say. This means that the “sacrificial ideology,” the conviction that the Christian has to sacrifice himself for God and to God, worked on two levels: for the martyrs

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<sup>3</sup> Moss, *The Myth of Persecution*, 127–62.

<sup>4</sup> Moss, *The Myth of Persecution*, 158. Concerning the number of martyrs see Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution*, 393–394.

themselves who wanted or at least were ready to die, and for the hagiographers who presented their heroes as rushing to death. These levels, unfortunately, cannot be distinguished, since the martyr narratives are not objective reports but more or less tendentious interpretations of the events (at very best; later texts often have nothing to do with historical events). Even if there were unquestionably some Christians who actually wanted to die for Christ (as e.g. Ignatius of Antioch), this eagerness for martyrdom was probably not dominant among them; later, however, after Constantine, hagiographers presented this as the glorious past of Christianity, while the great majority of those who had lurked quietly through the persecutions using every possible device to escape were simply condemned to oblivion. As Lane Fox puts it: "Tales of voluntary martyrdom thus belonged in the early literature of overachievement."<sup>5</sup>

In this chapter we shall examine some cases in which martyrs are clearly represented as sacrifices. Some of them are very well known and quoted everywhere, but as they are never connected to human sacrifices I shall try to shed some new light on them from this perspective; and I hope to present some less known examples as well. It will be of interest to discover that the language of sacrifice is not restricted to early martyr acts but appears in later texts as well.

## IGNATIUS OF ANTIOCH

From Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, we possess seven letters considered as authentic by modern scholarship<sup>6</sup> and written at the beginning of the second century (between 100 and 118 AD) while Ignatius was being transported to Rome to be thrown to the beasts. These letters are different from other martyrological texts in that they contain the thoughts and feelings of a person facing martyrdom. As to his actual martyrdom, we know nothing.

Ignatius considers himself as a sacrifice, but what exactly he means by this is not too clear. He declares several times that he is dying for others, but we do not learn what benefit the others can have from his death. Through the teeth of the beast he wants to become "the wheat of God," "the bread of Christ" (*Rom.* 4.1), "a sacrifice (θυσία) for God" (*Rom.* 4.2). He desires to

<sup>5</sup> Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians*, 445; cf. Perkins, *The Suffering Self*, 15–16.

<sup>6</sup> This is the so called "middle collection," see Moss, *The Other Christs*, 41.

be offered as a libation (σπονδισθῆναι) to God; the altar (θυσιστήριον) has already been prepared and the Christians in Rome will be the choir (*Rom.* 2.2). Kellermann has grouped all these passages under the title “spiritual interpretation of martyrdom as holocaust and burnt sacrifice.” But the way of his dying makes any identification with the OT sacrifices quite difficult and the letters themselves do not try to establish any concrete analogy. They rather use a general terminology (θυσία, θυσιστήριον), and “libation” (σπονδισθῆναι) probably signifies the shedding of blood (cf. 2 Tim 4.6; Phil 2.17).

As Lane Fox remarks, Ignatius likely considered his death “as a Eucharistic offering in which his blood was to be the wine and his body, crunched by the beasts, the wheat of God.”<sup>7</sup> Thus, it seems, the situation has become totally inverted: while the Eucharist symbolized the body and the blood of the Son of God given as food and drink to human beings, here the body and the blood of a human being becomes food and drink for God—not symbolically, but actually. This implies a very atavistic notion of the divinity needing or at least enjoying material food and drink.

On several occasions Ignatius calls himself ἀντίψυχον, ‘substitute, fee’<sup>8</sup> (*Eph.* 21.1; *Smyrn.* 10.2; *Polyc.* 2.3; 6.1). This expression, which by the way is very rare, reminds us naturally of 4 *Macc.*, where it had the meaning of “ransom,” in other words, the death of the martyr has been a ransom for the sins of the people.

Twice Ignatius refers to himself as *peripsēma* (*Eph.* 8.1; 18.1) which means ‘offscouring, contemptible thing,’ but in polite addresses can also serve simply as an expressions of humility, similar to ‘your humble servant.’<sup>9</sup> The word occurs in 1 Cor 4.13 where Paul declares: “we have become ... the dregs of all things (πάντων περίψημα)...” But as the destruction of the offscourings has a purifying effect, *peripsēma* could be understood as the synonymy of ‘expiatory sacrifice’ or ‘ransom’. In Photius we read: “Thus they would say over the youth who was thrown each year into the sea for the release from the oppressing ills: ‘May you be our *peripsēma*.’ Either deliverance or redemption. And thus they would throw him into the sea, as if paying a sacrifice to Poseidon.”<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians*, 437.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. *PGL* 162.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Liddel and Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 1394; *PGL* 1078.

<sup>10</sup> Photius s. v. περίψημα, cf. Hughes, *Human Sacrifice*, 162; cf. Bauer, *Wörterbuch zum NT*, col. 1296.

Kellermann sees in every occurrence of the words *antipsuchon* and *peripsēma* an allusion to expiatory sacrifice.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, for Moss the death of Ignatius “had a concrete atoning purpose not only for himself but for the members of his church in Antioch.”<sup>12</sup> I am not sure if she is right on this point. It is true that Ignatius means to die for others, but he never mentions the “sins” of the others (nor even his own sins, for that matter). On the contrary, he praises rather than chastise those whom he admonishes in his letters. Nothing indicates that his martyrdom should expiate the sins of others, and this thought seems to be completely alien to him. It is more probable that Ignatius means to die instead of them and that *antipsuchon* has the meaning of ‘substitute.’<sup>13</sup>

I am not convinced, either, that *peripsēma* in *Eph.* 8.1 and 18.1 has the meaning of ‘sacrifice’; I think rather it is simply an expression of devotion and humility.<sup>14</sup>

If we look at Ignatius’ motivation we can conclude that the individual point of view is the dominating one: he wants to die in order to be with Christ and have eternal life. Nonetheless he is convinced that others will profit from his sacrifice and it will be pleasant for God; the expression “wheat of God” even suggests that God actually needs such food. Read interprets this as an echo of “redemptive communion,” one of the main categories of human sacrifice.<sup>15</sup>

### *The model(s) of Ignatius*

Ignatius is considered as the typical imitator of Christ and indeed he declares himself to be one. Nonetheless in describing his impending death he uses other models, too. It is a matter of debate in what measure he depends on Jewish or classical tradition. We shall now consider one by one his possible sources.

#### Ignatius and Christ

Ignatius considers himself a true follower of Christ: for him, to die for Christ means to become a true Christian (*Rom.* 3.2; cf. *Magn.* 5.2); he wants

<sup>11</sup> Kellermann, “Das Danielbuch und die Märtyrertheologie,” 45.

<sup>12</sup> Moss, *The Other Christs*, 84.

<sup>13</sup> *PGL* 162.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Williams, *Jesus’ Death*, 237, n. 83; Bauer proposes “alluntertänigster Diener” [your most devoted servant], *Wörterbuch zum NT*, col. 1296.

<sup>15</sup> Read, “Human Sacrifice: An Overview,” 516.

to become a true disciple of Christ (*Rom.* 4.2; 5.3) and to be the imitator (*mimētēs*) of Christ's passion (*Rom.* 6.3).<sup>16</sup> But his burning desire for death has nothing to do with Christ's attitude towards death, nor does the way of his death resemble that of Christ.

#### Ignatius and the Maccabees

A number of scholars have tried to prove the dependence of Ignatius on *4 Macc.* Williams argues first of all on the basis of the expression *antipsuchon*, present also in *4 Macc.* (6.29; 17.22). He notes that the way Ignatius uses the word is not the same as it was there, but he does not propose another translation. He finds however, other similarities, too, such as the endurance of the martyr, his designation as an athlete, and so on. The description of the instruments of torture given by Ignatius in *Rom.* 5.3 evokes for him the tortures suffered by the Maccabean martyrs.<sup>17</sup> Bowersock, in contrast, denies that Ignatius could have used *4 Macc.* (which according to him was written somewhat later than the earliest Christian martyrological texts) and proposes rather a common origin for both of them (Asia Minor). He argues that even the occurrence of *antipsuchon* in Ignatius can be understood with the help of classical parallels such as Lucian and Dio Cassius,<sup>18</sup> and that the expression means, just as in the two classical authors, that Ignatius "will free the Christians by assuming their bondage and death."<sup>19</sup> As both authors are later than Ignatius, the argument is not a very convincing one, but it suggests that it is worthwhile to look for classical parallels.

#### Ignatius and the classical tradition

Bowersock is not the only one to find similarities between the letters of Ignatius and classical writers. Other authors try to situate Ignatius in the line of the classical "noble death" tradition. Lately Heymann compared his death to the *devotio* of Decius: "Reminiscent of Roman *devotio*, Ignatius employed an overt sacrificial metaphor when asked to be 'poured out as an offering to god' (*Rom.* 2.2) and 'found worthy to be a sacrifice *thusia*' (*Rom.* 4.2)."<sup>20</sup> Even his eagerness to die evokes for Heyman the "noble death" tradition. Heyman,

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<sup>16</sup> Cf. Seeley, *A Noble Death*, 130.

<sup>17</sup> Williams, *Jesus' Death*, 236–38.

<sup>18</sup> Bowersock, *Martyrdom and Rome*, 80–81.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>20</sup> Heyman, *The Power of Sacrifice*, 184.

however, mentions another parallel, first identified by Brent<sup>21</sup>: "Ignatius' procession to martyrdom reflected the Christian counterpart to the imperial procession that ended with a sacrificial offering on an imperial altar."<sup>22</sup>

We can mention other parallels as well. In *Rom.* 5.3 we read: "Let there come on me fire, and cross, and struggles with wild beasts, cutting, and rearing asunder, racking of bones, mangling of limbs, crushing of my whole body, cruel tortures of the devil..."<sup>23</sup> As Ignatius knows that he will be cast before the beasts, the mentioning of all these instruments of torture does not make much sense. We can understand it better when we read the 24<sup>th</sup> letter of Seneca, one of the most important Roman sources concerning noble death. Seneca exhorts his friend Lucius in the following way to despise pain and death: "...why dost thou hold up before my eyes swords, fires and a throng of executioners raging about thee? ... Why dost thou again unfold and spread before me, with all that great display, the whip and the rack? Why are those engines of torture made ready, one for several members of the body, and all the other innumerable machines for tearing a man apart piece-meal?"<sup>24</sup>

Further on, the words of Ignatius in *Rom.* 5.3 show remarkable similarities with the *sacramentum gladiatorum*, the oath of the gladiators, who swore "to be burned, to be bound, to be beaten and to be slain by the sword."<sup>25</sup> Seneca himself quotes this oath in order to demonstrate how a noble person should face suffering and death.<sup>26</sup>

Another interesting parallel is provided again by Lucian: just as Demonax gives no instructions concerning the fate of his body and wants it to be devoured by birds and dogs so that in his death he could be "a service to living things,"<sup>27</sup> in the same way Ignatius hopes that the beasts will completely devour him, leaving no trace of his body, so that in his death he would not be burdensome to anyone.<sup>28</sup> Naturally we do not have to suppose that Ignatius was directly influenced by Seneca, or Lucian by Ignatius; we must rather presume that the above mentioned motifs were *topoi* known to everyone with a good average educa-

<sup>21</sup> Brent, *The Imperial Cult*, especially ch. 6.

<sup>22</sup> Quoted by Heymann, *The Power of Sacrifice*, 184.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Drodge and Tabor, *A Noble Death*, 130.

<sup>24</sup> Seneca, *Epistula* 24.14, quoted by Seeley, *The Noble Death*, 118.

<sup>25</sup> Barton, "Honor and Sacredness," 28, 36, n. 28, 29.

<sup>26</sup> Seneca, *Epistula* 37.1–2, quoted by Barton, "Honor and Sacredness," 37, n. 34.

<sup>27</sup> Lucian, *Demonax* 66, Seeley, *The Noble Death*, 141.

<sup>28</sup> *Rom.* 4.1; Seeley, *The Noble Death*, 130.

tion (we know from Seneca that the topic of “despising death” and the exempla attached to it were rehearsed over and over again in the schools<sup>29</sup>).

Therefore it seems that Ignatius, as a cultivated person of his age and a citizen of the Roman Empire, marched to his martyrdom the way a philosopher approaches “noble death” or as a gladiator goes to fight in the arena. This shows that the ideas he had about his impending martyrdom originated not simply from the biblical narratives about Jesus’ death but were deeply rooted in classical tradition, too.

## POLYCARP

Beside Ignatius, it is in regard to Polycarp that the sacrificial character of the martyr’s death is most marked, and he, too, like Ignatius, is considered as the true imitator of Christ. We shall examine the sacrificial terminology used in the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* (*MPol.*)<sup>30</sup> and look for the models which the hagiographer follows in presenting the death of his hero.

*MPol.* is generally considered as the earliest Christian account of a martyr’s death,<sup>31</sup> and Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna, is the first to be named expressly a ‘martyr.’ Its authenticity, however, has been questioned and it remains controversial when it was written and in what measure it contains historical truth. Dehandschutter argued for the reliability and historicity of the text. He dated the death of Polycarp between 156 and 160, and holds that the martyrdom was written shortly afterwards.<sup>32</sup> His opinion, though accepted by the majority of scholars, has been questioned repeatedly,<sup>33</sup> most lately by Candida Moss.<sup>34</sup> I shall not enter into this controversy; my aim is to look at the models the author of *MPol.* chose in presenting his hero, and in so doing to gain some insight into the literary devices used by him.

*MPol.* was written allegedly in order to edify the Christians in Philomelium, and whatever its historical value may be it clearly does not restrict itself to reporting the events in question, but interprets them as well.

<sup>29</sup> Seneca, *Epistula* 24.6.

<sup>30</sup> Greek text and English translation: *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, in Musurillo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, 2–21.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Moss, *The Myth of Persecution*, 94.

<sup>32</sup> Dehandschutter, “Le Martyre de Polycarpe,” 93–94.

<sup>33</sup> See Boeft and Bremmer, “Notiunculae martyrologicae V,” 146–51.

<sup>34</sup> Moss, *The Myth of Persecution*, 94–104.



Polycarp is arrested and sentenced to be burnt alive (as was foretold him in a vision). Before the fire is lit, he prays as follows:

... May I be received this day among them (i.e. the martyrs) before your face as a rich and acceptable sacrifice (προσδεχθείην ἐνώπιόν σου σήμερον ἐν θυσίᾳ πύονι καὶ προσδεκτῇ), as you, the God of truth who cannot deceive, have prepared, revealed, and fulfilled beforehand. Hence I praise you, I bless you, and I glorify you above all things, through that eternal and celestial high priest, Jesus Christ, your beloved child, through whom is glory to you with him and the Holy Spirit now and for all ages to come (ch. 14).<sup>35</sup>

The flames, however, do not touch him and he is within them “not as burning flesh but rather as bread being baked, or like gold and silver being purified in a smelting-furnace. And from it we perceived such a delightful fragrance (εὐωδίας ἀντελαβόμεθα) as though it were smoking incense or some other costly perfume” (ch. 15).<sup>36</sup> Finally the *confector* dispatches him with a dagger, and from the wound<sup>37</sup> flows such a quantity of blood that the flames are extinguished (ch. 16).

The text connects Polycarp's death to a very wide range of earlier sacrifices—burnt offering, *thusia*, fragrant offering—and his blood receives special importance, just as it did in the case of OT sacrifices. The word *thusia*, the most common Greek term for sacrifice, was used mainly for animal sacrifices, but as we have seen in ch. 2. it could be applied in the case of human sacrifices as well.

Polycarp, in contrast to Jesus, is called a holocaust (ὄλοκαύτωμα, 14.1). Burnt offering, in Hebrew *‘olāh*, was a special kind of OT animal sacrifice,<sup>38</sup> but human sacrifices were also designated by the same term. According to Eberhardt the burning of the offering marked the climax of the approach to God<sup>39</sup> in preference to the effusion of blood. In the case of Polycarp both are present, in contrast to Jesus; so on this point he manages to

<sup>35</sup> Trans. Musurillo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, 13–15.

<sup>36</sup> Trans. Musurillo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, 15.

<sup>37</sup> According to the manuscript a dove also came out of the wound, but this detail is omitted by Eusebius.

<sup>38</sup> See e.g. Seebaß, “Opfer [Sacrifice] II,” 260.

<sup>39</sup> Quoted by Moss, *The Other Christs*, 85.

surpass the sacrifice of Christ. Here we arrive to a very important point: the martyrs (in the records of the hagiographers but probably not in reality) do not simply imitate Christ but, above all, seek to surpass him.

If we look for the motivations of Polycarp, as we did also in the case of Ignatius, we can establish the following. Unlike what we saw by Ignatius the individual point of view is not dominant, though it is also present: Polycarp hopes to avoid judgement and eternal fire (11. ch.), and he is glad “to have a share among the number of the martyrs in the cup of ... Christ, for the resurrection unto eternal life ...” (14. ch.), but the burning desire for death found with Ignatius is completely lacking. The death of Polycarp was beneficial for others as well: he was thinking not only of his own salvation but also that of his “brothers,” and the atoning character of his martyrdom is quite clear as it “put a stop to the persecution” (*MPol.* 1.1).<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, he is a model for all the others: through him God wanted to show them “a witness in accordance with the Gospel” (1.2; 19.2). It is stressed throughout *MPol.* that the arrest and death of Polycarp happened according to divine intentions, thus he is a sacrifice decided, prepared and fulfilled by God. This sacrifice, however, seems to be offered by Christ, the High Priest. As Moss states: “The author of Polycarp uncomfortably constructs his death so that he dies at the hand of Jesus as a preordained sacrifice to God.”<sup>41</sup> In the case of Christ it was not easy to decide who offered him to whom; in the case of Polycarp, the problem received an unexpected solution: Christ, the High Priest of the Letter to the Hebrews, offers to God the martyr Polycarp. Was then the unique and eternal sacrifice neither unique nor eternal, and are new sacrifices needed from time to time to atone for new sins?

### *The models of Polycarp*

#### Polycarp and Christ

Polycarp seems to be the prototype of the imitator of Christ, and indeed the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* tries to follow the gospel narratives as closely as possible. It has been remarked long ago that in many details Polycarp imitates Christ: he is a “witness in accordance with the Gospel” (1.2; 19.2); “just as the Lord did, he too waited that he might be delivered up” (1.2); he is betrayed by someone close to him; he is arrested by a police captain

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<sup>40</sup> Musurillo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, 3.

<sup>41</sup> Moss, *The Other Christs*, 84.

(*eirēnarkhos*) named Herod (6.2); he enters the city on a donkey; his death takes place on a Friday; and so on.<sup>42</sup> According to Dehandschutter,<sup>43</sup> however, the imitation of Christ does not relate to the similarity (often only superficial) in details but to the fundamental attitude of Polycarp: just like Christ, he fulfils the will of God (*MPol.* 2.1), and the expression “witness in accordance with the Gospel” should also be understood in this way. Dehandschutter is probably right in calling these similarities superficial: Polycarp follows Christ but does so in his own way, and his death is surely *not* modelled after that of Christ.

### Polycarp and the Maccabean Martyrs

Williams argues that the author of *MPol.* probably knew *4 Macc.* and made use of it freely in his interpretation of Polycarp's death.<sup>44</sup> He bases his opinion on the following similarities:<sup>45</sup>

- the martyr's endurance in suffering (*MPol.* 2.2–4; 3.1; 13.3);
- the authorities attempt to dissuade the martyrs by appealing either to their youth or to their old age (*MPol.* 3.1; 9.2);
- the martyrs endure horrific tortures (*MPol.* 2.2; 13.3);
- they demonstrate their courage;
- the *agōn* motif expresses the martyrs' struggle and reward;
- cultic language is used in the prayers of Polycarp and Eleazar;
- the effect of the martyrs' deaths.

But the first, second and fourth points are commonplaces found in every description of noble death; Polycarp does not endure horrific tortures, and compared to the descriptions of *4 Macc.* his death is simple and fast; moreover the *agōn* motif has no importance in *MPol.*<sup>46</sup>; and the cultic language used in the prayer of Polycarp and the effect of the martyr's death have their antecedents in the NT as well.

<sup>42</sup> Moss, *The Myth of Persecution*, 63.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Dehandschutter, “Le Martyre de Polycarpe,” 93–95.

<sup>44</sup> Williams, *Jesus' Death*, 234–36.

<sup>45</sup> Williams, *Jesus' Death*, 235–36.

<sup>46</sup> The devil plays very little role in *MPol.* and some references to him belong to later redactions, cf. Moss, *The Other Christs*, 95. The devil's main business is to prevent Christians from recovering the saint's body (ch. 17).

Hadas evokes *MPol.* 2 (describing the endurance of the martyrs during torture) and remarks that this passage is “remarkably reminiscent of Fourth Maccabees.”<sup>47</sup> But ultimately it cannot be decided with certainty whether *MPol.* was influenced by *4 Macc.* or not.

#### Polycarp and the philosopher

Moss, while acknowledging the parallels with Jesus, maintains that on several points Polycarp resembles rather the philosopher, first and foremost Socrates, who willingly accepts death for his convictions and remains composed until the end:

Both Polycarp and Socrates are described as “noble” and charged with atheism. Neither was willing to persuade others in order to save his life. Socrates took control of his death by requesting the hemlock rather than waiting for it to be administered to him. Polycarp took control of his death by removing his own clothes and standing on the pyre without being nailed to the stake. Both Socrates and Polycarp prayed before dying, and the accounts of both of their deaths explicitly interpret their deaths as sacrifices. Socrates refers to Asclepius and pours out the hemlock as a libation offering, and Polycarp is described as being like a ram bound for sacrifice. ... both men are elderly. ... Finally their deaths are described as being models for others.<sup>48</sup>

Further, according to Moss, Polycarp’s self-control makes him resemble the Stoic philosophers: “Like Zeno and Anaxarchus, Polycarp takes control of the torture and demonstrates with his words that he is both manly and self-controlled.”<sup>49</sup>

All the same, I am not entirely convinced by Moss’s argument: some of the similarities established by her are generalities (prayer before death), while others are rather forced (requesting the hemlock and taking off his clothes). In any case, it is not very surprising that the description of Polycarp’s death shows similarities with “noble death” accounts because these latter had exercised their influence already much earlier on Jewish and Christian writings.

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<sup>47</sup> Hadas, *Hellenistic Culture*, 180; cf. Hadas and Smith, *Heroes and Gods*, 93

<sup>48</sup> Moss, *The Myth of Persecution*, 64.

<sup>49</sup> Moss, *The Myth of Persecution*, 65.

Polycarp's answer to the threats of the governor fits perfectly the paradigm we have called "defying the tyrant": "The fire you threaten me with burns merely for a time and is soon extinguished. It is clear you are ignorant of the fire of everlasting punishment and of the judgement that is to come, which awaits the impious. Why then do you hesitate? Come, do what you will" (11.2). Though this argument shows similarities with that of the Maccabean martyrs, it could also derive directly from the classical tradition and it is not necessary to see here the influence of *4 Macc.*

### Polycarp and Isaac

For my part, I propose to show that the narrative of Polycarp's death (chs. 13–16) was modelled first of all after the Aqedah, the sacrifice of Isaac.

1. He does not let himself be nailed to the pyre—a significant difference to the death of Christ. However, according to Moss, the *imitatio Christi* does not break down at this crucial moment; on the contrary, by refusing to be nailed down Polycarp surpasses Christ.<sup>50</sup> Though "surpassing" constitutes an important motif of *MPol.* (and of martyrology in general), it surely makes the story different from the Gospel narratives.
2. Instead of being nailed Polycarp is only bound—a detail which evokes naturally the Binding of Isaac. The similarity is emphasized by the expression "bound like a noble ram" (προσδεθείς ὥσπερ κριός ἐπίσημος). The animal caught in the bush and offered by Abraham instead of Isaac (Gen 22.13) is called by LXX κριός ("ram"), therefore by using this word *MPol.* establishes a parallel between the death of Polycarp and the Aqedah, and at the same time avoids any allusion to the Lamb (ἀμνός) of God.
3. Polycarp wants to become a "holocaust acceptable" for God (14.1), the only form of sacrifice which was not and could not be identified with Christ. He learned from a vision that he would be burnt. This is all the more interesting because at the end he dies by the thrust of a dagger, not by fire—a fact that does not seem to bother the author of *MPol.*, for whom evidently Polycarp *is* a holocaust. Isaac, similarly, is con-

<sup>50</sup> Moss, *The Other Christs*, 58.

sidered a perfect holocaust by the Jewish tradition, even if he was not burnt at all.<sup>51</sup>

4. Polycarp is placed on the pyre in order to be burnt (*MPol.* 14.1), just like Isaac (Gen 22.2,3,7,8,13). Like Isaac he is bound, and before dying he also delivers a speech (ch. 14), just as Isaac does according to a number of Jewish writings in which he not only gives his agreement to be sacrificed but also praises God for having accorded him this favor.
5. The fire does not touch him: this reminds us of Dan 3, especially according to the Greek version (see Dan 3.49–50).
6. Jewish tradition often mentions the blood of Isaac even if not a single drop of it was spilled. But there is no expiation without blood. Polycarp is killed at the end by a dagger and from the wound comes such a quantity of blood that it extinguishes the fire (16.1).
7. Williams has remarked that the prayer of Polycarp (14.1–2) shows similarities with that of Eleazar in *4 Macc.*<sup>52</sup> This is true, but the parallels between the words of Polycarp and those of Isaac according to *LAB* are even more interesting:
  - “his offering was acceptable before my face”<sup>53</sup> (*facta est oblatio in conspectu meo acceptabilis*) (*LAB* 18.6)—“May I be received this day before your face as a rich and acceptable sacrifice (προσδεχθείην ἐνώπιόν σου σήμερον ἐν θυσίᾳ πόνι καὶ προσδεκτῇ) (*MPol.* 14.2);
  - “If a lamb of the flock is accepted as sacrifice to the Lord with an odor of sweetness”<sup>54</sup> (*Si agnus ex pecoribus acceptatur in oblatione Domini in odorem suavitatis...*) (*LAB* 32.3)—“...he was bound like a noble ram chosen for an oblation from a great flock, a holocaust prepared and made acceptable to God”<sup>55</sup> (ἡριὸς ἐπίσημος ἐκ μεγάλου ποιμνίου εἰς προσφοράν, ὀλοκαύτωμα δεκτὸν τῷ θεῷ ἡτοιμασμένον) (*MPol.* 14.1), cf. *MPol.* 15.2: “...we perceived such a delightful fragrance...”<sup>56</sup> (εὐωδίας τοσαύτης ἀντελαβόμεθα);
  - “...have I not been born into the world to be offered as a sacrifice to him who made me? ... the Lord has made the soul of man worthy

<sup>51</sup> Cf. Vermes, “Redemption,” 205.

<sup>52</sup> Williams, *Jesus’ Death*, 236.

<sup>53</sup> Trans. Harrington, *Pseudo-Philo*, 325

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 345.

<sup>55</sup> Musurillo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, 13.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

to be sacrificed" (*Quid si non essem natus in seculo, ut offerer sacrificium ei qui me fecit? ... quoniam dignificavit Dominus animam hominis in sacrificium*)<sup>57</sup> (LAB 32.3) — "...I bless you because you have thought me worthy of this day and this hour..."<sup>58</sup> (εὐλογῶ σε ὅτι ἡξίωσάς με τῆς ἡμέρας καὶ ὥρας ταύτης) (MPol. 14.2).

Thus the description of Polycarp's death can be situated rather in the framework of Jewish tradition, and while on the whole the account of Polycarp leading up to his execution follows mainly the Gospel narratives, the scene of his death itself is modelled after the Aqedah and not after the passion of Christ. It would be interesting to know to what extent the author of MPol. consciously avoided identifying the death of his hero with that of Christ. Even if Polycarp partakes of the cup of Christ (14.2), he does so according to a Jewish model. His death is an expiatory sacrifice just as that of the Maccabean martyrs had been and the result is the same: the cessation of persecution (MPol. 1.1; 19.2; cf. 4 Macc. 1.1; 17.20–22; 18.4–5).<sup>59</sup> The similarities with Isaac clearly connect the death of Polycarp to human sacrifice.

The *Martyrdom of Polycarp* follows a very ancient paradigm present both in the Old Testament and in classical sources: God stops the calamity (in this case the persecution) which he himself has launched (evidently because of the sins of the people/the Christians) only after having received the adequate quantity of human blood, and naturally of innocent blood; and we have noted the importance of blood in MPol.

## THE MARTYRS OF LYONS AND VIENNE

The *Letter of the Churches of Lyons and Vienne*, addressed to the churches of Asia and Phrygia, is conserved in the *Ecclesiastical History* of Eusebius (5.1.3 – 2.8). Though probably based on (otherwise unknown) historical events, it had been reworked in the third century. The detailed description of tortures in which the text abounds is also a characteristic of later martyrdom accounts. It is generally admitted that the *Letter* was influenced by 4 Macc.<sup>60</sup>

<sup>57</sup> Trans. Harrington, *Pseudo-Philo*, 345.

<sup>58</sup> Musurillo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, 13.

<sup>59</sup> Cf. Williams, *Jesus' Death*, 168–70; 236.

<sup>60</sup> Cf. e.g. Moss, *The Other Christs*, 189.

It reports the execution of a group of Christians in 177 in consequence of local persecutions in Gaul, the reasons for which remain hidden to us. The *Letter* is marked by a strong dualism: persecutions and tortures come from the devil, against whom the martyr (and in him/her Christ) leads a cosmic battle. The victory achieved in this battle naturally serves the glory of God/Christ (1.25), and even those who die in prison because of the horrible circumstances augment the glory of God: “Hence the majority were strangled in prison, as many as the Lord wished to die in this way, showing forth his glory” (1.27).<sup>61</sup> This means that martyrdom is wanted and decided upon by God.

The martyrs are evidently imitators of Christ; this appears in the clearest form in the case of Blandina whose body, hung on a post, takes the form of a cross (1.41).

The sacrificial language is used liberally throughout the text, but its meaning is quite different to what we saw in previous cases. Through the different ways of their deaths “plaiting one crown of many different flowers and colours, they offered it (προσήνεγκαν) to the Father” (1.36)<sup>62</sup>; “... they (Maturus and Sanctus) were in the end sacrificed (ἐτύθησαν), after being made all the day long a spectacle to the world to replace the varied entertainment of the gladiatorial combat” (1.40)<sup>63</sup>; Alexander and Attalus, after having endured all kind of torture were also “sacrificed (ἐτύθησαν) at the end” (1.51), and from the burning body of Attalus arose a “sacrificial savor” (κνῖσα) (1.52), and finally Blandina too is “offered in sacrifice (ἐτύθη)” (1.56).

Moss remarks that in the *Letter* the use of sacrificial imagery and language does not imply a positive assessment of sacrifice, on the contrary, its aim is rather to emphasize the injustice and barbarism of the events (Attalus, who is burnt alive, calls this cannibalism; Blandina is treated like an animal—she is put in a net and exposed to a bull).<sup>64</sup> In my opinion the use of sacrificial language means here that the martyrs were seen as sacrifices not only by the Christians but also by their Roman executioners who meant to offer them to their own “pagan” gods. Frend presumes that the persecutions were launched because of an affront against the tutelary gods (i.e. because

<sup>61</sup> Trans. Musurillo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, 71.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>64</sup> Cf. Moss, *The Other Christ*, 85–86. We have to remark, however, that animals were never sacrificed this way; nets were only used to catch them.



the Christians refused to participate in their cult) and “the condign punishment of the Christians was regarded as a necessary vindication of the gods and indeed, a form of human sacrifice to them.”<sup>65</sup>

As in all the previous cases, we can ask ourselves who offers the sacrifice to whom. On the one hand, the pagans offer the Christians to their gods. The verb ‘to offer, to sacrifice’ (θύω) is used in the passive: the martyr is sacrificed. The agent of the passive verb is not the martyr (this would be expressed by the middle voice), thus it has to be the executioner. On the other hand, the Christians offer themselves to God: in 1.36 the martyrs offer the crown of their different ways of death to God.

In the *Letter* the sacrifice of the martyrs has no atoning effect, neither is there any mention of sins. The persecution was launched by the devil and nothing indicates that this happened because of the sins of the Christian communities in Lyons and Vienne. This means that these latter can profit from the martyrs’ death only as from examples. The martyrs, naturally, die in the hope of reward (1.34) and through their combat they gain “the great crown of immortality” (1.36). But their martyrdom serves first and foremost to show forth the glory of the Lord (1.27).

## PERPETUA

Stroumsa writes: “The *Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicity* (18.4) seems to me one of the most gripping testimonies of the perception of the martyr as a sacrifice, as much by the pagans as by the Christians. At the circus, before confronting the beasts, the Christians are made to dress in the robes of the priests of Saturn (for the men) and of the priestesses of Ceres (for the women). The ritual, even carnivalesque, character of the execution of Christians here transforms the circus into a temple.”<sup>66</sup> This sacrificial character of the martyrdom of Perpetua and her companions is treated in detail by Salisbury.<sup>67</sup> In the following I depend mainly on her analysis, which I shall supplement at certain points with my own remarks.

In 203, under Septimius Severus, Perpetua and her companions were martyred in Carthage. The events preceding the persecution are told through the diary of Perpetua (ch. 3–10) and another martyr, Saturus, wrote down the

<sup>65</sup> Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution*, 9.

<sup>66</sup> Stroumsa, *The End of Sacrifice*, 75–76.

<sup>67</sup> Salisbury, *Perpetua's Passion*.

vision he had in prison (ch. 11–13). The execution itself is reported by an eyewitness, a member of the Carthaginian Christian community (ch. 14 – 21) who also supplied an introduction to the whole story (ch. 1 – 2). The authenticity of the *Martyrdom* is generally accepted.

We are interested first and foremost in chs. 16 – 21, describing the last days and the death of Perpetua and her companions. We shall not treat in detail this very well-known text; instead, we shall focus on the motifs connected with our topic.

The martyrs are condemned to fight with the beasts during the games organized on Geta's birthday (7.9; 16.3).<sup>68</sup> In connection with this Salisbury quotes Girard: "[The] purpose of the sacrifice is to restore harmony to the community, to reinforce the social fabric,"<sup>69</sup> and adds: "This describes exactly the nature of the sacrifice of Perpetua and her companions: the violence perpetuated against them was to ensure ritually the continuity and peace of the state. This sacrifice was appropriately celebrated on the birthday of the Caesar Geta."<sup>70</sup>

Perpetua, while in prison, has a dream where she, transformed into a man, wrestles with an Egyptian symbolizing the devil (ch. 10). According to Salisbury the president of the games (*lanista*) wears the traditional robe of the priests of Saturn (10.8), which would establish a connection between the child sacrifices offered to this god and Perpetua's martyrdom. In fact, the description given of the *lanista* corresponds exactly to the *agonothetēs* of the Pythian games,<sup>71</sup> so we have to dismiss the reference to Saturn.

The last night before their deaths the Christians partake in the prison of the "free banquet" (*cena libera*), the ritual meal offered to gladiators before the fight. For them, however, it becomes transformed into an agape, the ritual love feast of the Christians (17.1).<sup>72</sup>

Their march to the arena is also more of a solemn procession than the leading of criminals to their executions (18.1–3).

<sup>68</sup> Geta was the son of Septimius Severus.

<sup>69</sup> Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 8.

<sup>70</sup> Salisbury, *Perpetua's Passion*, 122.

<sup>71</sup> Cf. Boeft and Bremmer, "Notiunculae martyrologiae II," 391. It should be translated as 'president of the games' instead of 'trainer' as Musurillo translates, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, 119.

<sup>72</sup> Salisbury, *Perpetua's Passion*, 123, 137.

The most important motif is without doubt the purposeful costuming: "They were then led up to the gates and the men were forced to put on the robes of priests of Saturn, the women the dress of the priestesses of Ceres" (18.4). Saturn, as we have seen, was the favorite god of the Carthaginians, and Ceres was also popular. By this it becomes evident that the martyrs are meant as sacrifices to these divinities.

Perpetua protests against the costuming: "We came to this on our own free will (*sponte*), that our freedom should not be violated. We agreed to pledge our lives provided that we would do no such thing. You agreed with us to do this (*hoc vobiscum pacti sumus*)" (18.5), and the tribune accepts her arguments. This means that there was actually a pact between the Christians who were to be put to death and the Romans that the former would march voluntarily to their deaths. This agreement corresponds to the old Carthaginian principle according to which a sacrifice can be effective only when offered voluntarily. At this point it becomes very clear that Perpetua and her companions on the one side, and the Roman military tribune and the Carthaginians on the other, accept equally that humans should be offered to the divinity; the issue of contention is only which divinity is meant.

The martyrs are attacked and wounded by the wild beasts, but not killed. They end their lives as defeated gladiators do: by taking the sword "in silence and without moving" while having their throat cut (21.8). In Perpetua's case, however, the unexperienced gladiator misses the mortal blow and Perpetua guides the young man's trembling hand to her throat (21.9).

### *The models of Perpetua*

It is quite evident that we would look in vain for models of Perpetua among the biblical heroes, Christ included. Her predecessors are first and foremost those classical heroes and heroines (among them such Carthaginian women as Dido or the wife of Hasdrubal) who ended their lives of their own will.

In the arena, when Perpetua is thrown to the ground by a wild heifer her first concern is to pull "down the tunic that was ripped along the side so that it covered her thighs, thinking more of her modesty than of her pain" (20.4).<sup>73</sup> This is the motif of the "decent fall" of the sacrificed virgin which originates probably with the *Hecuba* of Euripides (568–70) but later on became a

<sup>73</sup> Musurillo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, 129.

widespread *topos* in classical literature.<sup>74</sup> Thus Ovid for example applies it to Lucretia: “Even then in dying she took care to sink down decently: that was her thought even as she fell”<sup>75</sup> (*tunc quoque iam moriens, ne non procumbat honeste, // respicit: haec etiam cura cadentis erat* [Fasti 2.833–34]). As Salisbury remarks, it is hardly possible that Perpetua could have been occupied with arranging her dress while tossed around by the beast, so this detail has to be attributed to the narrator who wanted to emphasize the perfection of the martyr’s behavior even on this point.<sup>76</sup> Thus the narrator made Perpetua the imitator of such classical heroines as Polyxena, who was sacrificed to the dead Achilles, and Lucretia, who, after having been violated, killed herself with a dagger (note that Lucretia was held up by Tertullian as an example before future martyrs<sup>77</sup>). But it was not enough to imitate these heroines, Perpetua had to surpass them. Therefore the narrator continues: “Next she asked for a pin to fasten her untidy hair: for it was not right that a martyr should die with her hair in disorder, lest she might seem to be mourning in her hour of triumph” (20.5).<sup>78</sup> It is totally unimaginable that someone fighting the beasts in the middle of the arena should ask for hairpins (from whom?), to the point that the scene becomes almost comical. But perhaps the narrator had also other reasons than to make Perpetua overshoot her predecessors. Ovid insists that Lucretia’s disheveled hair is a sign of her mourning (“She sat with hair disheveled like a mother who must attend the funeral pyre of her son”<sup>79</sup> [*Passis sedet illa capillis, // ut solet ad nati mater itura rogam, Fasti 2.813–14; ... concussa ... coma, 2.846*]). It seems that the narrator of Perpetua’s martyrdom consciously opposed it to Ovid on this point and strove to prove that Perpetua, contrary to Lucretia, did not go into death grieving, but joyfully and triumphantly.

The final gesture of Perpetua, when she directs the sword against her throat, is perhaps reminiscent of the stories of Carthagian heroines who freely took their own lives. This supposition is reinforced by the comment of the hagiographer: “It was as though so great a woman ... could not be dispatched unless she herself was willing” (21.9).<sup>80</sup>

<sup>74</sup> Cf. Ambroise de Milan, *Hymnes*, ed. and transl. Fontaine, 399.

<sup>75</sup> Ovid’s *Fasti*, trans. Frazer, 117.

<sup>76</sup> Salisbury, *Perpetua’s Passion*, 143.

<sup>77</sup> Cf. Tertullian, *Ad Martyras* 4.4.

<sup>78</sup> Musurillo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, 129.

<sup>79</sup> Ovid’s *Fasti*, trans. Frazer, 117.

<sup>80</sup> Musurillo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, 131.

Salisbury presumes that Perpetua knew *4 Macc.* and the Maccabean mother served her as an example in her relation to her son: "Perhaps she imagined herself, like the Maccabean mother, dying with her son. However, Christian witness was more individual than Jewish community solidarity. She was not to have her son join her in martyrdom, but it would take more time in prison before Perpetua came to that realization."<sup>81</sup> Let us hope that Perpetua had more common sense than what is presumed of her and contented herself with relinquishing her baby instead of wanting him to be killed as well. So I am not convinced that any similarity between Perpetua and the Maccabean mother can be established. In my opinion the only passage where perhaps the influence of *2 Macc* or *4 Macc.* can be detected is 18.8 in which Revocatus, Saturninus and Saturus threaten the military tribune with the words: "You have condemned us, but God will condemn you" (*Tu nos, inquit, te autem Deus*). This vengeful attitude of the Christians going to martyrdom resembles rather the behavior of the seven brothers in *2 Macc* than that of Stephen who prays for his executioners.

Thecla, as she appears in the apocryphal *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, might also have served as a model for Perpetua: both are well-to-do young Roman women who quite brutally sever all family ties in order to go their own ways.

## DASIUS

The relation between human sacrifice to the "pagan" gods and Christian martyrdom is even more pronounced in the *Martyrdom of Dasius*.

The events seem to be well documented: they take place under Diocletian and Maximian in Durostorum (Moesia), the *legatus* presiding at the trial being Bassus, likewise a historical person. The historical existence of Dasius is beyond doubt and his martyrdom probably did take place under the reign of Diocletian, although the exact date remains unknown.<sup>82</sup> In its present form, however, the text dates most likely from the end of the fourth century, since it shows the influence of the Nicene Creed (8.2), and Dasius signing himself with the cross (11.2) is certainly an anachronism. Thus, the historicity of the text as a whole is quite doubtful.

<sup>81</sup> Salisbury, *Perpetua's Passion*, 89.

<sup>82</sup> He is celebrated on the 20<sup>th</sup> of November.

As Delehaye has shown, the text consists of two parts.<sup>83</sup> The first tells about a feast of Saturn (evidently the Saturnalia) celebrated yearly in Durostorum among the soldiers. One of them was chosen to represent Saturn during the festival. He was clad in royal robes and for thirty days was permitted to lead a life of complete license but afterward he had to kill himself by the sword before the altar of the divinity. When the soldier Dasius is chosen for this, he decides that, instead of sacrificing himself to an idol and receiving for this eternal damnation, he will rather sacrifice himself to Christ (sic!). After describing the “infamous feast of Saturn” the author inserts his condemnation: “The despicable custom has come down even to our own time and is observed in an even more disgraceful fashion,” and we are informed that the Christians participate at the pagan new year’s feast which is celebrated with a procession and on this occasion they even “march ...disguised, wearing the custome and appearance of the Devil”<sup>84</sup> (ch. 3). The second part constitutes the martyrdom of Dasius proper: it is a short and rather reserved report about his interrogation before the tribunal and his execution by the sword. He dies because he is a Christian and refuses to sacrifice to the gods; no mention is made of the feast of Saturn or Dasius’ role in it.

We shall now examine the description of the Saturnalia which has given rise to so much debate. Earlier its authenticity was largely accepted.<sup>85</sup> Frazer in his *Golden Bough* argues on the basis of this text<sup>86</sup> that originally the Saturnalia were celebrated in this way, which later on fell out of use in Rome (where only an “emasculated copy” of the original remained) but which was preserved in wild and distant regions.<sup>87</sup> Weinstock, who examines together the two feasts described in the *Martyrdom of Dasius* and in the *Acts of Caesarius*, comes to the conclusion that the feast of Durostorum could indeed have taken place in the above manner and must have been a survival of the Roman Saturnalia transformed under oriental influence into an expiatory

<sup>83</sup> Delehaye, *Les Passions des martyrs*, 321–28.

<sup>84</sup> Trans. Musurillo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, 273.

<sup>85</sup> Cf. e.g. its first editor, Cumont, “Les Actes de Dasius,” 1–16; cf. Boeft and Bremmer, “Notiunculae martyrologicae,” 51.

<sup>86</sup> Which he accepts without any demure: “According to these narratives, which have all the appearance of being authentic, and of which the longest is probable based on official documents, the Roman soldiers at Durostorum in Lower Moesia celebrated the Saturnalia year by year in the following manner...” (Frazer, *The New Golden Bough*, 319–20).

<sup>87</sup> Frazer, *The New Golden Bough*, 320.

feast.<sup>88</sup> Others are more cautious. Schwenn thinks it very doubtful that in the Roman army under Diocletian a soldier could have been put to death in such a way and considers the story rather a pedagogical one which aims at showing how a Christian is to behave in such a situation.<sup>89</sup> Musurillo, in his foreword to the *Martyrdom of Dasius* does not take a clear position but remarks that "there is no evidence, apart from the *Martyrdom of Dasius*, that the feast had ever been celebrated in the Roman armies."<sup>90</sup> "Present scholarly opinion agrees that the martyrdom is legendary," wrote Boeft and Bremmer in 1981.<sup>91</sup> Since then, however, Pillinger has devoted a whole monograph to the *Martyrdom of Dasius* in which she argues for the authenticity of the story,<sup>92</sup> and Versnel also leaves open the possibility that such a ritual could have existed.<sup>93</sup> Opposing this point of view Boeft and Bremmer in 1995 affirm again that "we are not discussing a proper ritual but a literary composition which the author either made up or found in one of his sources."<sup>94</sup> Now I shall briefly summarize the reasons which prove that the story has no historical basis.

1. We have to do with a hagiographic text, which should be treated with suspicion, as has been quite clearly understood since Delehay.
2. The description does not fit at all with what we know about the Saturnalia, which was in Rome a feast of merrymaking with disguises and the suspension of the social order. The king of the Saturnalia was a jester, and nothing sinister is connected either to him or to the feast.<sup>95</sup> Those who nonetheless insist on the reality of the feast in Durostorum base their arguments on its similarity either with the Sakaia or the scapegoat ritual.
3. The Sakaia was a Babylonian feast celebrated every year at the end of August and the beginning of September. Not much is known about it,<sup>96</sup> and the alleged similarity between the Sakaia and the feast of Duros-

<sup>88</sup> Weinstock, "Saturnalien und Neujahrsfest in den Märtyreracten," 399.

<sup>89</sup> Cf. Schwenn, *Menschenopfer*, 168.

<sup>90</sup> Musurillo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, XLI.

<sup>91</sup> Boeft and Bremmer, "Notiunculae," 52.

<sup>92</sup> Pillinger, *Das Martyrium des heiligen Dasius*.

<sup>93</sup> Versnel, *Inconsistencies in Greek and Roman Religion 2. Transition and Reversal in Myth and Ritual*, 210–27.

<sup>94</sup> Boeft and Bremmer, "Notiunculae V," 161.

<sup>95</sup> Cf. Latte, *Römische Religionsgeschichte*, 427 (s. v. "Saturnalia").

<sup>96</sup> Briant calls it "mystérieux," cf. Briant, *Histoire de l'empire*, 746.

troum is based on a single passage from Dio Chrysostom (1<sup>st</sup> century AD) which runs as follows:

... they take one of their prisoners ... who has been condemned to death, set him upon the king's throne, give him the royal apparel, and permit him to give orders, to drink and carouse, and to dally with the royal concubines during those days, and no one prevents his doing anything he pleases. But after that they strip and scourge him and then hang him (467).<sup>97</sup>

The story is told to Alexander as an edifying tale and its purpose is to bring home to him that if a king ascends to the throne without being well prepared for the task he will behave like a fool and will come to an ignominious end. The information given by Berossus seems much more trustworthy: according to him the feast of Sakaia lasted five days during which slaves ruled over their masters. One of the former was chosen as their leader and he was clad in a garment similar to the royal one.<sup>98</sup> But even if we accept the description of Dio, some quite important differences to the feast of Durostorum remain (in the first case it is a criminal who has to die, in the second a soldier who has committed no crime at all; the first is executed, the second is obliged to kill himself), and it is hard to imagine how this obscure Babylonian feast, never before attested in the Roman Empire, could turn up suddenly in Moesia about 300 AD. It is much easier to suppose that the author of the *Martyrdom of Dasius* knew the description of Dio Chrysostom and made ample use of it.

4. *Pharmakos* rituals<sup>99</sup> are well known in Greece, and it is true that persons designated to become scapegoats were often fed for a certain time at public cost before being driven from the land.<sup>100</sup> In certain cities scapegoats were allegedly killed. The case which shows the greatest similarity with ours is that of Massilia: "For whenever the Massilians were suffering from pestilence one of the poor would offer himself to be fed the entire year at public expense and on especially pure foods. Later this man, decorated with branches and sacred vestments, was led

<sup>97</sup> Dio Chrysostom 1, trans. Cohoon, 199.

<sup>98</sup> Athenaeus 14.44.

<sup>99</sup> See above in ch. 2, 36–38.

<sup>100</sup> Cf. Schwenn, *Menschenopfer*, 26–59; Hughes, *Human Sacrifice*, 139–65.



around the whole community under curses, that the ills of the whole community fall on him, and so was he cast out. And this can be read in Petronius."<sup>101</sup> According to another source, this happened yearly, which seems more likely, and at the end the man was stoned.

*Pharmakos* rituals were known from the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE onwards up to the first century AD, but for later writers they are nothing more than curiosities of olden days.<sup>102</sup> It was a Greek ritual, and the Massilians who practiced it were the descendants of ancient Greek colonists.<sup>103</sup> It is quite improbable that a *pharmakos* ritual was celebrated at the turn of the fourth century in the Roman army.

Furthermore, *pharmakos* rituals show considerable differences as compared to the Saturnalia in Durostorum: the *pharmakoi* are poor, afflicted persons or criminals, and no soldier is ever mentioned among them; they are never offered to Saturn—the god is either not named, or is Apollo. Scholars more recently have been of the opinion that the *pharmakoi* were not actually killed, only expelled; from our point of view this is not very important, but we should note that no *pharmakos* was ever thought to have killed himself.

Instead of imagining that a *pharmakos* ritual was celebrated at Durostorum with an actual human sacrifice it is more fitting to suppose that the author of the text knew such stories as the one about the Massilians.

5. It is not clear whether human sacrifice ever formed part of Roman religion, and on the rare occasions when it was practiced it was always in extreme situations. From 97 BCE laws were promulgated prohibiting such rites even in the regions inhabited by barbarians.<sup>104</sup> It is out of the question that in a Roman province human sacrifice could have been enacted openly on a yearly basis.
6. It has been remarked that as time goes on the number of human sacrifices multiplies spectacularly in literary works, and it is not by chance that the most complete list of them is found in the philosopher Porphyry (third century AD).<sup>105</sup> Plutarch and Pausanias also abound in

<sup>101</sup> Servius commentarius in Vergilii *Aeneida* 3.57, quoted by Hughes, *Human Sacrifice*, 158.

<sup>102</sup> Hughes, *Human Sacrifice*, 165.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 159.

<sup>104</sup> See above in ch. 2, 54.

<sup>105</sup> Porphyry, *De abstinentia* 2.53.3–56.10, quoted by Hughes, *Human Sacrifice*, 123–24. See above in ch. 2, 48–49.

such cases and their reports often end with the statement: “and this is practiced even in our time” or something similar. Christian writers continue this tradition with great relish in order to denigrate and disqualify the so-called “pagan” religions. So for example a considerable number of Christian authors are aware of human sacrifices offered to Jupiter Latiaris in Rome, and Lactantius affirms that this was still practiced in his time.<sup>106</sup> Today nobody seriously believes that these sacrifices really could have taken place in the Roman capital, even if numerous (though certainly not independent) sources affirm it. We have no reason to attribute any more trust to a single and quite obscure testimony simply because it concerns a distant part of the empire.<sup>107</sup>

Thus it is evident that our story is nothing more than a literary product pieced together from different (historical, mythical, and literary) elements: the feast of Saturnalia with its king, the descriptions of Sakaia and of the *pharmakos* ritual, and the myth of the hero sacrificing himself for his country. Therefore we shall treat the text as a literary construct and instead of looking for historical facts we shall look rather at the intentions of the author.

The best analysis of the structure and intentions of this work is still that of Delehaye, who has shown that the real concern of the author was the pagan New Year’s feast celebrated in his time by Christians, too; and wanting to restrain them from participating in it, he resorts to the authority of Dasius.<sup>108</sup> Delehaye, however, does not explain why the author needed to create a gruesome feast which never took place in order to stop the celebration of a rather innocent carnival. In fact, the author made use of a rather ingenious device: instead of putting lengthy admonitions in the mouth of Dasius against pagan practices as many Christian writers had done from Tertullian onward, he made Dasius act, instead of speaking. In this way he transformed the whole story into a little drama with Dasius as protagonist, which permitted him to attain a twofold aim: to make the intended lesson

<sup>106</sup> Lactantius, *Divinae Institutiones* 1.21.3; Porphyry is the only non-Christian author to mention it, cf. Schwenn, *Menschenopfer*, 180–81. Cf. Hughes, *Human Sacrifice*, 124, 129.

<sup>107</sup> Latte e.g. accepts that by the end of the imperial period the Saturnalia could have incorporated foreign customs, *Römische Religionsgeschichte*, 362, Anm. 4, but rejects the testimony of the Apologists about Jupiter Latiaris, *ibid.* 144, Anm. 3.

<sup>108</sup> Delehaye, *Les Passions*, 321–28.

more evident and to entertain his audience. Recently several scholars have pointed out that the acts and legends of the martyrs were “spectacula,” and in the life of the church during the fourth and the fifth centuries they were intended to replace the pagan spectacles which the Christians still visited with relish. The execution of the martyr had always been a public event with many spectators; when afterwards the account of it was read in church the hearers necessarily became spectators just as if they were participating at the event. Thus the acts and legends of the martyrs functioned as little dramas consisting of several scenes.<sup>109</sup> In the case of the *Martyrdom of Dasius* this is completely true. In the first part of the drama he is intended as a sacrifice to Saturn (by killing himself by the sword); in the second part he actually becomes a sacrifice for Christ (being killed by the sword). Dasius had to choose between the two, and he chose Christ. In the same way Christians also have to choose: to follow either Dasius or pagan ways. The motivation of Dasius is therefore quite simple: he has to die in either case, he simply chooses the better way to do so and hopes thereby to gain eternal life. The combat motif is also quite strong: through his choice he is victorious over the devil (4.1; 8.2)

The most interesting point for us is that martyrdom is set in parallel with a human sacrifice to Saturn, which means that for the author, and presumably for his readers as well, it seemed quite natural even in the fourth century AD that humans should be sacrificed to a divinity, the only question being the right divinity to choose. The parallel between the two is emphasized by the way of death: the person to be sacrificed to Saturn has to kill himself by the sword; and Dasius, sacrificed to Christ, is killed by the sword. In this way a parallel is established between Saturn and Christ; Christ, who formerly was himself a sacrifice, now on his turn demands sacrifices.

## CAESARIUS

The *Acta Caesarii*, which shows the influence of the *Martyrdom of Dasius*, similarly establishes a parallel between the martyrdom of its protagonist and human sacrifice. The text, which is clearly legendary, has come down to us in four versions, the earliest of which can be dated to the 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> century. Caesarius, the patron saint of Terracina, was a historical person, but nothing

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<sup>109</sup> Grig speaks of “courtroom dramas”, *Making of Martyrs*, 59–78.

precise is known about him. His cult is attested not only in Terracina, but also in Rome at the end of the 5<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>110</sup>

The events described in the *Acta Caesarii* happened allegedly under the reign of Nero. First of all, we are informed that every year in Terracina a feast takes place where some ignorant persons (*homines ignari*), after receiving treasures, ornaments, weapons and horses, throw themselves with this array from a precipice into the sea. This happens for the sake of the state and the emperor, and is considered a noble deed by the habitants of Terracina. When Caesarius arrives from Africa to Terracina, it is the turn of a handsome young man (*juvenis speciosus*) called Lucianus to be sacrificed on the calends of January. Caesarius is horrified, and to his question he receives the following answer:

He is entertained as he likes during eight or six months. When the time has expired, he goes up to the hill above the sea, armed, decorated and mounted on horseback, and throws himself down to his death for the salvation of the state, the emperor, and the well-being of the citizens, and in order to have a name of glory. His body will be recovered with great honor, transported to the temple of Apollo and burnt. His ashes will be kept in the temple for the salvation of the state and the citizens.<sup>111</sup>

Despite the indignation of Caesarius the sacrifice actually takes place, and with it a long conflict begins between Caesarius and his friends on the one side and the priest of Apollo and the Roman authorities on the other, which leads to the martyrdom of Caesarius and his companion Julianus. Both are put into a sack and thrown from the precipice into the sea. The waves, however, throw their bodies to the shore where the Christians give them a proper burial. Their tombs become holy places visited by many people, and through their prayers “great deeds happen even up to this day,” and “many are converted and baptized there.”<sup>112</sup>

It is quite clear that the feast of Terracina never actually took place; it is nothing but fiction, and there is no need to argue against its reality.<sup>113</sup>

<sup>110</sup> Versnel, “Self-sacrifice,” 145 (with bibliography); Amore, “Cesario e Guliano,” col. 1154–55.

<sup>111</sup> *Acta Sanctorum Novembris* 1, 107.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 117, 115.

<sup>113</sup> Cf. Hengel, *Atonement*, 25–26; Deubner, *Attische Feste*, 187–88; Weinstock, “Saturnalien und Neujahrsfest,” 399–400.

Its mixed character is even more pronounced than that of the Saturnalia in Durostorum, which probably also influenced this description. The author has mingled motifs from the *pharmakos* ritual ("ignorant" victims fed at public cost), from the wide-spread myth of heroic self-sacrifice for the city (a beautiful young man voluntarily dies for the sake of others), from the rite of the Roman *devotio* (riding in full war gear to his death),<sup>114</sup> and from the legend of Curtius,<sup>115</sup> who allegedly leapt on horseback into a chasm in the middle of Rome.

As compared to the *Martyrdom of Dasius*, the *Acta Caesarii*, however, introduces a new feature: the story does not end with the death of the victim, but the fate of the young man's body now becomes important. It is recovered, burnt and buried in the temple of Apollo, meaning that he has become a hero and a cult is devoted to him ("his ashes were kept in the temple for the salvation of the state and the citizens").

The real question about the alleged ritual is why it has been put at the beginning of the *Acta Caesarii*. The structure of this work is not as tight as that of the *Martyrdom of Dasius*, but the intentions of the author are nevertheless clear. As Hengel states: "The narrative shows how in a later period the ancient rite was elaborated by the inclusion of traditional elements, while at the same time the pagan custom was transformed into an antitype of the Christian veneration of martyrs."<sup>116</sup> This is quite true, but we can go further and ask why the author considered this necessary. The answer seems clear enough: he wanted to show that the cult of the martyr replaces the ancient cult of gods and heroes, and that it is of a much higher value (Lucianus has been sacrificed to the "dead," Caesarius, by contrast, to the true God). The author uses the same device that the author of the *Martyrdom of Dasius* employed: instead of arguing against the pagan cults or making his protagonist argue against them, he enacts the whole ritual and strives to show its absurdity and cruelty through the acts and words of his protagonist, Caesarius. While the *Martyrdom of Dasius* attacked in this way the pagan feast (in which the Christians, too, participated), the *Acta Caesarii* attacks the pagan cult (in which perhaps the Christians still participate, though no mention is made of this). In so doing the work has recourse to literary devices: the adventures suffered by the quite numerous positive and negative protagonists

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<sup>114</sup> See above in ch. 2, 52–53.

<sup>115</sup> See above, ch. 2, 52.

<sup>116</sup> Hengel, *Atonement*, 27.

show much similarity with Hellenistic novels and the influence of the apocryphal acts of the apostles can also be presumed.

There is, however, another motif which perhaps merits our attention. The parallel between the Christian martyr Caesarius and the pagan hero Lucianus is emphasized by their manner of death: both of them end their life by throwing themselves or by being thrown from a cliff into the sea. But even if they die the same manner of death, there is a great difference between the two: Lucianus jumps voluntarily, seized by a fury, whereas Caesarius is put into a sack and thrown down by others; Lucianus is handed over to death, but Caesarius to life (he will be reborn from the water); Lucianus dies in vain, Caesarius in order to become a holy martyr.<sup>117</sup>

We must also remark that the manner of execution is rather curious: martyrs were in general beheaded, burnt, set before wild animals, but not thrown in the sea. Jumping down from high cliffs is however the most common way of suicide, practised first of all (at least allegedly) by the Donatists, who strove to become martyrs by ending their life voluntarily in this manner. The second canon of the synod of Carthage in 348 treats precisely such cases in refusing them the title of "martyr" (whereas they were venerated as such by the Donatists): "No ungodly person should discredit the dignity of the martyrs ... and call by the name of martyr those who have thrown themselves down (from a cliff) out of madness (*insania praecipitados*)..."<sup>118</sup> This referred probably to Marculus, a Donatist bishop who died in 347 under the Macarian persecutions: the Donatists affirmed that he was a martyr, having been cast down from the rocks, and they devoted a cult to his earthly remains; the Catholics, however, presumed that Marculus has thrown down himself. "When have Roman authorities decreed such punishment as casting men down from the rocks?," asks Augustine.<sup>119</sup>

In the light of these facts, it is difficult when reading the *Acts of Caesarius* not to think of the Donatist controversies, and the pagan Lucianus

<sup>117</sup> "Me quidem aqua, quae regeneravit quasi filium suum ex se renatum suscipiet, ut ipsa me modo martyrem faciat...", *Acta Sanctorum Novembris* 1, 114.

<sup>118</sup> Maier, *Le dossier du donatisme* 1, 294–95; Munier, "Carthage," in *DECA* 1, 421–22; Grig, *Making of Martyrs*, 57; cf. Drodge and Tabor, *A Noble Death*, 167–85.

<sup>119</sup> Augustine, *Tractatus in Johannis Evangelium*, 11.15, quoted by Grig, *Making of Martyrs*, 57.

who, seized by fury, hurls himself in the sea<sup>120</sup> corresponds very well to the would-be Donatist martyrs (cf. *insania praecipitatos*) condemned by the synod of Carthage.

I do not wish to argue that the *Acta Caesarii* were written against the Donatists, but it seems quite probable that memories of the Donatist controversy played a role in the *Acts*. At least a relation between Africa and the events in Terracina is established by the minor and seemingly superfluous remark that Caesarius arrived from Africa.

As we have seen, for the authors of the *Martyrdom of Dasius* and the *Acta Caesarii* Christian martyrs were actually humans sacrifices, the equivalents of the (mythical or real) pagan ones. The equivalence is emphasized by the fact that in both writings the Christian martyrs die exactly the same way as their pagan counterparts did (in the *Martyrdom of Dasius* by the sword, in the *Acta Caesarii* by being thrown or jumping from the rocks). The authors of these writings do not criticize the institution of human sacrifice as such; they only want to show that pagan sacrifices are insane and useless because offered to non-existing "gods." Thus it seems that Christians of the 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> century considered it normal that human beings should be sacrificed or should sacrifice themselves to God or even to Christ (as in the case of Dasius). Unfortunately, we do not learn from the two writings why God or Christ requires them to do so.

We have also shown that the parallel between an alleged pagan human sacrifice and the martyrdom of the Christian hero is a literary device which could be used in various ways: to discredit the pagan feasts or hero cult or even the excesses of Christian martyr worship, or (last but not least) by the insertion of these dramatic elements to make the stories of the saints more colorful and diverting for pious readers and hearers.

## AGNES

The figure of Agnes is especially interesting for us because it is entirely modelled on human sacrifices, even if on voluntary ones: I shall seek to demonstrate by her example how the Euripidean heroines became transformed

<sup>120</sup> "...arreptus furia coepit furiose arripere equum, et cum ascendit in montem, praecipitavit se ipse et mortuus est" (c. 9), *Acta Sanctorum Novembris* 1, 108.

into heroic martyrs. The case of Agnes is very revealing since she is the prototype of the virgin martyr and many other figures are modelled after her.<sup>121</sup> For Christian predecessors she has Perpetua and Felicitas on the one hand, who are martyrs but not virgins, and Thecla on the other, who is a virgin but not a martyr. Her real predecessors, however, can be found in pagan classical literature.

Concerning her life and death we possess no historical data; we are not even sure if she was martyred under Diocletian or earlier. Some have even questioned her existence, but it seems that she actually was a Christian martyr.<sup>122</sup> The earliest Roman Calendar, the *Depositio Martyrum* (354 AD), mentions her and her cult in Rome is attested as early as the 340s. Since nothing is known of her life and suffering, the hagiographers could give free rein to their phantasy. Damasus, who was concerned to promote the cult of the martyrs, devoted an epigram to her according to which she was burnt alive.<sup>123</sup> Damasus does not speak explicitly of her virginity, but calls her a young girl (*puella*) and praises her modesty (*pudor*); allusion is also made to her nudity covered by her hair. Her career really begins with Ambrose, who writes about her in his 8<sup>th</sup> *Hymn* and in his treatise *De virginibus*: it is here that she becomes the prototype of the virgin martyr who wins the double crown of chastity and martyrdom. According to Ambrose she dies by the sword because she refuses to sacrifice to idols. Prudentius in the 14<sup>th</sup> chapter of his *Peristephanon* elaborates on the theme and inserts the novelistic motif of the brothel: the prefect seeks to compel her to sacrifice to Minerva by sending her to a brothel, but even there she is miraculously preserved intact. Finally, the 5<sup>th</sup> century *Passio Agnetis*<sup>124</sup> gives some additional touches to the story: she is a young girl, twelve or thirteen years old, beautiful and noble. The son of the pagan prefect falls in love with her, but she refuses him, because “Christ is her lover.”<sup>125</sup> The prefect, on hearing about this, first wants to make her a Vestal virgin, which she naturally refuses, then sends her to a brothel, again to no effect. She is condemned to be burnt alive

<sup>121</sup> Cf. Grig, *Making of Martyrs*, 79.

<sup>122</sup> Cf. Schäfer, “Agnes,” in *RAC* 1, 184–86.

<sup>123</sup> No. 37 according to the edition of Ferrua: Damasus, *Epigrammata*.

<sup>124</sup> Latin text: *Passio Agnetis*, in *Acta Sanctorum Januarii* 2, 714–28.

<sup>125</sup> Cf. *Passio* quoted by Grig, *Making of Martyrs*, 80. Or as Prudentius puts it: “she is warm with the love of Christ” (*Peristephanon* 14.11–12).



but escapes without harm; finally she is dispatched by the sword.<sup>126</sup> After her death she appears to her parents in glorified form, and later on miracles are performed by her tomb. Here we have the legend fully developed. We can see how the motif of chastity gains ground more and more: barely mentioned by Damasus, it becomes the central topic of the *Passio* in which Agnes must die because she refuses the advances of the son of the prefect.

We shall now examine one by one the similarities between Agnes and the Euripidean heroines. Several of them have already been identified and it is clear that in the 8<sup>th</sup> *Hymn* Ambrose modelled his Agnes after Polyxena. We are however interested in the figure of Agnes as she is represented by her full hagiographic "dossier." And we shall also investigate how the classical motifs are transformed and filled with Christian content.

Agnes is noble (at least according to the *Passio*), just as were Iphigeneia, Polyxena and Macaria.

She is young, just at or before the age of marriage, exactly like her classical counterparts; she is a virgin like them, and she too chooses death instead of marriage.

Here we arrive at a point which needs some closer investigations. Lucy Grig remarks that "her march to the scaffold is described as a bridal cortège, and her martyrdom as a mystical marriage."<sup>127</sup> Indeed, according to the 8<sup>th</sup> *Hymn* of Ambrose:

One would think she is going to her wedding,  
she advances with such a joyful face,  
bringing new treasures to the bridegroom:  
the effusion of her blood as her dowry. (4)

In his *De virginibus* Ambrose has Agnes say to the executioner: "I await with pleasure this blow coming from the bridegroom, so that he, who has chosen me before, should accept me. Why is the murderer delaying?" (2.9) In Prudentius Agnes addresses a speech to the executioner which expresses with

<sup>126</sup> According to Damasus she is killed by fire, according to Prudentius and Ambrose by the sword. The *Passio* evidently combined the two, which is not surprising if we think of *MPol*.

<sup>127</sup> Grig, *Making Martyrs*, 82. Similarly St. Pelagia goes to her martyrdom clad in bridal attire.

very direct sexual symbolism that the penetration of the sword signifies for her union with Christ:

I rejoice that there comes a man like this, a savage, cruel, wild man-at-arms, rather than a listless, soft, womanish youth bathed in perfume, coming to destroy me with the death of my honour. This lover, this one at last, I confess it, pleases me. I shall meet his eager steps half-way and not put off his hot desires. I shall welcome the whole length of his blade into my bosom, drawing the sword-blow to the depths of my breast; and so as Christ's bride I shall o'erleap all the darkness of the sky and rise higher than the ether.

(*Peristephanon* 14.69–80).<sup>128</sup>

And as we have seen, in the *Passio* also Agnes calls Christ her lover.

Thus Agnes is a virgin, the bride of Christ, whose union with her lover takes place through her martyrdom. Here again we find interesting classical parallels, which as far as I know have not been fully addressed.<sup>129</sup>

Already in Sophocles *Antigone*, who is a virgin willing to die for the Law, calls her tomb a bridal chamber (*Antigone* 891).

In Euripides, as we have seen, Iphigeneia was brought treacherously to Aulis under the pretext of a marriage with Achilles, but instead of being led by her father to the wedding she is led to the altar to be slaughtered. The ambiguity between the two permeates the whole tragedy. It is clearly present in the words of Agamemnon which according to appearances concern the wedding of Iphigeneia but in reality refer to her sacrifice: "The lustral waters are prepared and ready, as are the meal-cakes to throw in the cleansing fire and the victims which must be slain before the marriage ceremony, victims, whose dark blood must gush forth to Artemis" (*Iphigeneia in Aulis* 1111–14).<sup>130</sup>

When she is led to the place of sacrifice, Iphigeneia, already in full command of the situation, refers to the words of her father and uses the same figures of speech: "Let someone initiate the rites with the sacred baskets, let the fire blaze with the cakes of purification and let my father circle the altar from

<sup>128</sup> See Prudentius 2, ed. and trans. Thomson, 343.

<sup>129</sup> Fontaine draws attention to the fact that Polyxena and Iphigeneia are also virgins to be sacrificed (Ambrose, *Hymnes*, 391) but does not develop this any further.

<sup>130</sup> English trans.: Hadas and MacLean, *Ten Plays*, 341.

the left toward the right. ... Bring me fountains of lustral water. Weave the dance about the temple, about the altar of Artemis, about Queen Artemis the blessed. With my blood, if I must, with my sacrifice I shall wash away the oracle's bidding..." (*Iphigeneia in Aulis* 1470–86).<sup>131</sup> In *Iphigeneia in Tauris* the identification of wedding and death is expressed even more clearly: "Alas, my father! I by thee am led/ A bride to bridal rites unblest'd and base" (365–366).<sup>132</sup>

In the case of Euripides' Polyxena the parallel between marriage and sacrifice is less pronounced but is still present. Polyxena deplores that she is to die "without a bridegroom, unwed" (ἄνυμφος, ἀνυμέναιος) (*Hecuba* 416) and Odysseus, as he leads Polyxena to her death, calls himself "leader and bringer of the virgin" (πομπὸς καὶ κομιστῆρας κόρης), which readily evokes the image of a wedding.

In Euripides Polyxena is offered to the dead Achilles. Hellenistic writers elaborated on this theme and a romance between Polyxena and Achilles was created; a *scholion* to Euripides even knows of a planned marriage between them which came to naught because Achilles was murdered. Thus Polyxena's ritual killing is not simply a sacrifice to the dead hero, but becomes a sort of union in death or beyond death.<sup>133</sup>

Not surprisingly, behind the idea that Agnes is the bride of Christ lies the allegorical interpretation of the Song of Songs which identifies the bridegroom with Christ and the bride with the human soul. Origen was the first to apply this allegory which later on became very popular, and Ambrose also used it with great enthusiasm. This image, in fact, had originally nothing to do with martyrdom, but it could be easily connected with it through the classical type of the virgin who goes to the sacrificial altar as to her wedding feast. How successfully this connection was made is shown by a homily where Isaac, the prototype of the martyr, before being sacrificed is represented as a bride.<sup>134</sup>

Finally, the death of Agnes is clearly modelled after classical prototypes: Agnes bends her knee before dying (Ambrose, *Hymn* 8.8) just as Polyxena

<sup>131</sup> English trans.: *Ibid.*, 350. Cf. 1394–95: "This shall be/My husband, and my children, and my fame."

<sup>132</sup> Quoted by Bergmann, *In the Shadow of Moloch*, 59.

<sup>133</sup> Cf. Hughes, *Human Sacrifice*, 61–62.

<sup>134</sup> Cf. Hilhorst, "The Bodmer Poem on the Sacrifice of Abraham," see below ch. 6.

did in Euripides (*Hecuba* 561) and Iphigeneia does in Lucretius (1.92). She offers her bosom to receive the mortal blow (Ambrose, *Hymn* 8.6), just like Polyxena in the *Hecuba* (558–61)<sup>135</sup>; but then she bends her neck in prayer and it is in this position that the executioner strikes her with his sword, cutting off her head (Prudentius, *Peristaphanon* 14.85–87). The motif of the “decent fall” of the sacrificed virgin, which we encountered above with Perpetua,<sup>136</sup> is also present. In Agnes’ case, already the epigram of Damasus praises her “modesty” (*pudor*)<sup>137</sup> and we find a similar emphasis in Ambrose: “Covering herself completely with her gown she made proof of her care for modesty, so that nobody should set eye on what was hidden” (*Hymn* 8.7).

Thus the Euripidean heroines were transformed into Christian martyrs. However, during the transformation they underwent considerable changes. The meaning and value of virginity has changed, indeed it has become central. Moreover, the situation has reversed: while Iphigeneia and her companions cannot marry because they have to die, Agnes, and following her many other virgin saints, must die because they refuse to marry.

It is not fortuitous that during the fourth century the virginity of the martyr becomes so important. With earlier female martyrs it played no role; many of them were married and had children. When Ambrose and Prudentius write, the persecutions are over; there are no more martyrs; instead, the new heroes of Christianity are the ascetics. Bloody martyrdom is replaced by a bloodless one. “A double crown of martyrdom was vouchsafed to her,” writes Prudentius about Agnes. A Pseudo-Chrysostomian homily about Thecla begins as follows: “It seems to me if I were seeing today the blessed maiden in a mirror pictured by memory; she is holding in one hand the crown for her victory over lusts, in the other the crown for her victory over dangers ... For she possessed virginity, too, and this is, when we look at it closer, a great martyrdom before martyrdom.”<sup>138</sup> The transition from martyrdom to asceticism is expressed here very clearly. The figure of Agnes connects the two ideals: the old one, that of the martyr, and the new ideal, that of the virgin.

<sup>135</sup> Ovid briefly mentions this motif, *Metamorphoses* 13.459.

<sup>136</sup> See above 135–36; cf. Ambrose, *Hymnes*, 399.

<sup>137</sup> “O veneranda mihi sanctum decus alma pudoris” (*Epigramma* 37.9).

<sup>138</sup> PG 50, col. 745 (*CPG* 4515), trans.: Pesthy, “Thecla among the Fathers of the Church,” 172.

The next observation concerns the literary genres used in hagiography. We have suggested above concerning the *Martyrdom of Dasius* that the acts and legends of the martyrs were "spectacula" and functioned as little dramas consisting of several scenes. The hagiographic "dossier" of Agnes makes it clear that dramatic elements (taken from Euripides or his successors) could be incorporated very successfully in the legends of the saints and were probably very effective in enlivening the whole story.

Finally, we return to the theology of martyrdom and the motif of human sacrifice. The Christian authors, Damasus, Ambrose, Prudentius and the unknown author of the *Passio* made Agnes the equivalent of the virgin sacrifices of the pagans (Ambrose explicitly speaks of her sacrifice). For these Christian writers Agnes is a human sacrifice, just as Iphigeneia and Polyxena were. In his work *De virginibus* Ambrose calls virginity "a sacrifice (*hostia*) the daily offering (*sacrificium*) of which appeases divine wrath" (1.7.32). Thus, it seems, sacrifices have exactly the same function as they had for the so-called "pagan" gods.

The motivations of Agnes can be easily identified: her story is a story of love with Christ and she wishes to die in order to be united with her lover. There is no question of any "others"; Agnes' sacrifice is not meant to help them in any way. It is, however, presumed that Christ rejoices in her death, which she offers to him as a gift or a dowry. Agnes, like Dasius, offers herself to Christ, not to God.

## OTHER CASES

In his *Martyrdom* Eleutherus prays before being killed that his blood should become libation (σπονδή) and sacrifice (θυσία) for those who are tormented because of God.<sup>139</sup> The martyr's death serves here as expiation for those others but its purpose is to save them from earthly pains instead of otherworldly punishment.

In the Latin version of the *Acts of Carpus, Papylus, and Agathonike* the proconsul says to Pamfilus: "Sacrifice to the gods (*Immola diis*)..." whereat Pamfilus replies: "I have served God from my youth, and I have never offered sacrifice (*immolauit*) to the empty idols; rather I immolate myself

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<sup>139</sup> Cf. *PGL* 660.

(*immolo me autem ipsum*) to the living and true God ...” (ch. 3).<sup>140</sup> The martyr’s self-sacrifice replaces here the ritual sacrifice offered to the pagan gods. It should be emphasized that it is the martyr himself who sacrifices himself (*immolo me ... ipsum*). The Greek omits the half phrase “rather I immolate myself...” (cf. *Acts of Carpus* 34 [Greek]) According to Eusebius (*Ecclesiastical History* 5.15.48) Carpus and his companions were martyred under Marcus Aurelius but the description better fits the Decian persecutions. The Latin version is probably a later, perhaps fourth century abridgement of the earlier Greek version.<sup>141</sup>

The case of Euplus is similar to that of Pamphilus. In the Latin version of his *Acts* the prefect says to him:<sup>142</sup> “If you want to be free, offer sacrifice (*Sacrifica*),” and Euplius replies: “I sacrifice myself now to Christ my God (*Sacrifico modo Christo Deo me ipsum*)” (*Acts of Euplus* 6).<sup>143</sup> The only difference to Pamphilus is that Euplus sacrifices himself to Christ, not simply to God. In the Greek version of the *Acts* there is no mention of sacrifice. Euplus was allegedly martyred under Diocletian, but the historicity of his *Acts* is quite questionable.<sup>144</sup>

The *Martyrdom of Saint Conon* ends by stating: “... the blessed Conon was brought as an offering (προσφορὰ προσηνέχθη) to God the king of the ages, to whom glory is for ever and ever. Amen” (7). Before dying Conon prays: “Lord Jesus Christ, receive my soul; rescue me from these bloodthirsty hounds, and give me rest in the company of all your just ones who have fulfilled your will ...” (4).<sup>145</sup> For Conon, becoming a sacrifice was the means of arriving in the presence of God. The terms προσφορὰ and προσφέρω are used throughout Heb 10 to denote different types of sacrifice.<sup>146</sup> Conon was probably martyred under Diocletian, but the historicity of his *Acts* is questionable.<sup>147</sup>

<sup>140</sup> Musurillo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, 30–31.

<sup>141</sup> Cf. Moss, *The Other Christs*, 182.

<sup>142</sup> The martyr’s name in the Greek is Euplus, in the Latin Euplius.

<sup>143</sup> Musurillo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, 316–17.

<sup>144</sup> Cf. Musurillo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, XLV; Moss, *The Other Christs*, 185–86.

<sup>145</sup> Musurillo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, 192–93.

<sup>146</sup> Cf. Moss, *The Other Christs*, 85.

<sup>147</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 85.

According to his *Acts*, Bishop Felix, executed under Diocletian,<sup>148</sup> said before being beheaded: "O Lord God of heaven and earth, Jesus Christ, I bend my neck as a sacrifice for you (*tibi cervicem meam ad victimam flecto*), who abide for ever" (30).<sup>149</sup> The Appendix of the account omits this phrase. The bishop's gesture is that of the Euripidean heroes who freely present their neck or bosom to the mortal blow. Felix, like Euplus, offers himself to Christ.

Arcadius says to his members lying scattered on the ground: "Happy members ... you at last truly belong to God, being all made a sacrifice to him" (*Martyrdom of Arcadius* 2.3).<sup>150</sup>

The *Martyrdom of Marian and James* ends with the rather enigmatic passage (I quote it according to Musurillo's translation):<sup>151</sup> "Truly immeasurable is the mercy of the all-powerful God and his Christ towards his dear ones, since he not only strengthens those who place their trust in his name by favor of his grace, but also quickens them by the Atonement of his blood (*sed et sanguinis redemptione vivificat*). Who indeed can measure his favors by their true value? For here too he works ever with love of a father, to the end that the very ransom we believe to be paid by our own blood (*et hoc ipsum quod in nostro sanguine rependi credimus*) is granted to us by God almighty ..." (13.4–5)

According to Moss this means that "the blood of the martyrs is the ransom paid by the love of God. ... the victory of Christ is the event that enables them to achieve victories, but their own deaths have salvific significance."<sup>152</sup> In fact, the text does not use the word 'ransom' in reference to the martyrs, it only says: "what we believe to be paid by our blood" and the verb used (*rependo* = 'to pay back') is not that of ransoming (*redimo*). It is however true that the blood of the martyr is compared to the atoning blood of Christ, thus it is possible that the text attributes salvific effect to the martyrs' blood. Unfortunately, it does not explain what exactly the martyr has to pay and why. Neither is it evident (just as in the case of the ransom paid by Christ) to whom he pays it, to the devil or to God; probably we have to presume it is to God.

<sup>148</sup> Concerning his textually quite problematic *Acts* see the brief summary by Moss, *The Other Christs*, 186.

<sup>149</sup> Musurillo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, 271.

<sup>150</sup> Quoted by Moss, *The Other Christs*, 86, 246.

<sup>151</sup> Musurillo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, 213. The *Martyrdom of Marian and James* was composed probably in North Africa and reached its final form before 310, see Moss, *The Other Christs*, 190–91.

<sup>152</sup> Moss, *The Other Christs*, 100.





## The Models of the Martyr

It is a well-known fact that martyrs had to be made: to become a ‘martyr’ it was not enough to die for Christ (sometimes not even necessary, see e.g. Thecla), the story had to be told by the hagiographer who was able to present the (actual or fictive) death of a (real or imaginary) person as a heroic public act accomplished for Christ. The martyr as the new Christian hero was intended to replace all former ones, and to achieve this the hagiographers used various devices. In this chapter we shall concentrate on a special aspect of the hagiographer’s task: the models used to present the protagonist as heroically as possible.

It is a commonplace, accepted and repeated by all without qualification, that the Christian martyr imitates Christ.<sup>1</sup> Theologically it is probably true that the faithful believer is ready to die for Christ because he is convinced (rightly or not) that this is his duty because Christ has died for him.<sup>2</sup> But, on the basis of our previous investigations, I shall argue that in the majority of cases the most important model used by the hagiographer in composing his account of the martyr’s execution and the events leading to it (arrest, tribunal, prison, tortures, etc.) is not Christ, even if the martyr actually declares that he is following Christ and although certain details are taken from the gospel accounts of Jesus’ death. Naturally, the hagiographer could use several models in one and the same martyr narrative. We also observe that if

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<sup>1</sup> See e.g. recently Maarten, “Das Martyrium als imitatio Christi,” 167–203.

<sup>2</sup> For a great number of martyrs this idea seems to play no role at all (let us merely recall Thecla or Agnes).

Christ actually serves as model for the description, this is often included only to demonstrate how the martyr surpasses him. In the first part of this chapter I shall sum up the main differences between Christ and the martyr. In the second part I shall briefly review the models used in martyrology, relying mainly on the material furnished by the case-studies in chapter 5, but where necessary I shall also quote other examples.

## IMITATIO CHRISTI?

The difference between the martyr's death and that of Christ is especially obvious with regard to their respective behavior. The martyrs' aggressive and provocative manner and their zeal to promulgate their convictions and to insult their enemies as much as possible are just the opposite of the passive and reserved attitude of Christ.

Let us briefly summarize the differences with the help of some examples chosen in a somewhat haphazard way.

- Jesus does not want to die (cf. Mt 26.36–44; Mk 14.32–44; Lk 22.39–44; neither does he show any desire to die in John, even if he considers his death as his glorification and the fulfillment of his mission)—whereas the martyrs, without exception, want to die. “This we long for, this we desire,” answer the ‘saints’ to the threats of the magistrate in the *Acts of Justin and his Companions*.<sup>3</sup> This desire for death can reach pathological extremes as in the case of Ignatius: he desires to die (ἐρῶν τοῦ ἀποθανεῖν); he entreats the Christians in Rome not to undertake anything in order to save him; if the beasts do not kill him voluntarily, he will compel them to do so (cf. *Rom.* 4 – 7).
- Jesus does not want to suffer, either—the martyr, on the contrary wants to suffer as much as possible in order to achieve higher glory. Thus Saturninus “insisted that he wanted to be exposed to all the different beasts, that his crown might be all the more glorious.”<sup>4</sup>
- Jesus is sad according to Matthew (26.38) and Mark (14.34); in John he awaits calmly what is to come—whereas the martyrs rejoice: Fructuo-

<sup>3</sup> *Acts of Justin and his Companions* (Recension C) 4.6 (Musurillo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, 59).

<sup>4</sup> *Martyrdom of Perpetua* 19.2 (Musurillo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, 127).

sus is “glad (*gaudens*) that he would receive the Lord’s crown”<sup>5</sup>; Marian and James can hardly check their overflowing joy (*gaudia cumulata frenare*) when they are arrested<sup>6</sup>; Perpetua and her companions go joyfully (*hilarēs*) to their execution<sup>7</sup>; Agathonike throws herself joyfully (ἄγαλλιωμένη) upon the stake<sup>8</sup>; Carpus is smiling while he is nailed to the stake<sup>9</sup>; and so on.

- Jesus waits to be arrested—Christians often present themselves voluntarily before the Roman authorities in order to become martyrs, as happened, for example, in 185 when a whole group of them appeared before Arrius Antoninus, the proconsul of Asia, asking to be executed. The proconsul executed some of them and advised the others to kill themselves using rope or cliffs.<sup>10</sup> We do not know if the would-be martyrs followed his advice or not, but the desire for martyrdom often resulted in suicide. Thus, for example according to the Greek version of the *Acts of Carpus, Paphylus and Agathonike* the latter, seeing the others martyred, “threw herself joyfully upon the stake”<sup>11</sup>; Germanicus drags the beast on top of him<sup>12</sup>; Perpetua at the end guides “the trembling hand of the young gladiator to her throat”<sup>13</sup>; Euplus presents himself before the prefect shouting: “I want to die; I am a Christian!”<sup>14</sup>; Agnes in Ambrose and Eulalia in Prudentius (both of them very young girls) escape from home in order to become martyrs; and so on.<sup>15</sup> Natu-

<sup>5</sup> *Martyrdom of Fructuosus* 1.4 (Musurillo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, 177).

<sup>6</sup> *Martyrdom of Marian* 4.5 (Musurillo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, 199).

<sup>7</sup> *Martyrdom of Perpetua* 18.1 (Musurillo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, 125).

<sup>8</sup> *Martyrdom of Carpus* (Rec. A) 44 (Musurillo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, 29).

<sup>9</sup> *Martyrdom of Carpus* (Rec. A) 38 (Musurillo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, 27).

<sup>10</sup> The story is related by Tertullian, *Ad Scapulam* 5.1.

<sup>11</sup> *Martyrdom of Carpus* 42–44 (trans. Musurillo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, 29). For the dating of this event see Musurillo, *ibid.* XV–XVI.

<sup>12</sup> *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 3.1 (Musurillo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, 5).

<sup>13</sup> *Martyrdom of Perpetua* 2.9 (trans. Musurillo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, 131).

<sup>14</sup> *Acts of Euplus* 1 (trans. Musurillo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, 311; the Greek and Latin versions agree on this point).

<sup>15</sup> For other cases and a treatment of the question see Baslez, *Les persécutions*, 199–230. I do not agree with the conclusions of Baslez when she seeks to limit the suicidal disposition of the Christians to some extreme cases, cf. *Introd.*, 10. See also Drodge and Tabor, *A Noble Death*, 138–40; 152–55.

rally not every martyr appeared of his own accord before the authorities to declare himself a Christian (many were probably denounced by someone), but in the first centuries this kind of “voluntary” martyrdom was quite common (according to martyrological texts; we do not know how often it happened in reality), and those who practiced it were venerated as true martyrs (and still are, e.g. Agnes).<sup>16</sup>

- After having been arrested Jesus is passive and calm throughout the whole process. While in the synoptics he says almost nothing (Mt 27.11–14; Mk 15.1–5; Lk 23.3,9), in John he is more active: he, in his turn, questions Pilate and explains to him the meaning of his mission in such a way which the other, for obvious reasons, could not understand (Jn 18.33–38). Jesus here begins to show the manner of a martyr, even if his behavior remains very far from their aggressiveness and arrogance. The martyrs often conduct themselves in a very provocative manner. Pionius and his companions walk around in chains,<sup>17</sup> others refuse to give their names, Marcienne, an African saint, mutilates the statue of Diana, Dasius scatters the incense and tramples on the images of the emperors,<sup>18</sup> Valentine of Caesarea overturns the “pagan” altar, and so on.<sup>19</sup>
- Jesus remains silent rather than pleading his case before Pilate according to the synoptic Gospels, while in John he answers Pilate’s questions in a brief and quite dignified way (18.33–38; 19.11)—whereas the martyrs often deliver long speeches expounding their convictions and unveiling the errors of their persecutors, as e.g. in the *Martyrdom of Pionius*, 6 – 7; 16 – 17 and the *Martyrdom of Apollonius* (practically the whole text consists of the speeches Apollonius delivered before the proconsul Perennis).<sup>20</sup>
- Jesus is forgiving (cf. Luke 23.34)—the martyrs are often vengeful (see *Martyrdom of Perp.* 17.2 [Saturus]; *The Martyrdom of Marian and James* 6.10–11 [Marian in his vision participates in the heavenly tribunal and watches as the others are tried]; Tertullian, *On spectacles* 30).

<sup>16</sup> Clement of Alexandria raised his voice against seeking death in this way, *Stromata* IV. 4.17.1–4; see above *Introd.*, 10.

<sup>17</sup> *Martyrdom of Pionius* 3.5–7 (Musurillo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, 138–39).

<sup>18</sup> *Martyrdom of Dasius* 11.2 (Musurillo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, 279).

<sup>19</sup> For further examples see Baslez, *Les persécutions*, 206–10.

<sup>20</sup> Naturally we need hardly imagine that these speeches were genuine.

- Jesus in the synoptic Gospels suffers on the cross and feels himself forsaken by God (Mt 27.46; Mk 15.34), while in John he endures everything calmly—the martyr, on the other hand, even amidst the worst tortures feels no pains because Christ is with him or suffering instead of him. Blandina, when exposed to a bull, feels nothing “because of her intimacy with Christ.”<sup>21</sup> Felicitas declares: “...then another will be inside me who will suffer for me, just as I shall be suffering for him.”<sup>22</sup>
- Jesus suffers and dies as an ordinary vulnerable human being. Not so the martyrs: Polycarp remains untouched by the fire,<sup>23</sup> the wild beasts are unwilling to attack Thecla (a lioness even defends her),<sup>24</sup> after the tortures the martyr recovers miraculously even if all the limbs of his body were torn apart; and so on. The summit is probably reached in those later martyr stories where the hero resuscitates several times.<sup>25</sup>
- Jesus dies for others according to Christian interpretation, martyrs (as we shall see in the next chapter) mainly die for individual reasons, in other words, to receive their heavenly rewards.

This brief comparison makes it clear that the martyr, according to the hagiographer, shows much more heroism and intrepidity than Jesus did (even in John) and has to surpass him in every respect. Even if certain details in the martyr narrative correspond to motifs related to Christ, in the description of the behavior of the martyr during his trial and in the arena Christ as a model plays a relatively small role, and in later texts no role at all (e.g. probably nobody would affirm that Thecla, the so called “protomartyr,” imitates Christ, or that Agnes does, to mention only one of our case studies).

But what other models could the hagiographers use? We shall now examine how the models and paradigms of human sacrifice, self-sacrifice, noble death and so on treated in chapters 1–3 influenced martyrology.

<sup>21</sup> *Acts of the Martyrs of Lyons* 1.56 (Musurillo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, 81).

<sup>22</sup> *Martyrdom of Perpetua* 15.6 (Musurillo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, 125).

<sup>23</sup> *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 15.

<sup>24</sup> *Acts of Paul and Thecla* 33.

<sup>25</sup> E.g. Julius of Aqfahs who, according to the Coptic version, returns to life five times and succeeds in dying only at the sixth occasion; cf. Saxer, “Jules d’Aqfahs,” in *DECA* 2, 1369. We shall treat his story in the next chapter.

## OLD TESTAMENT HUMAN SACRIFICES

From the three human sacrifices reported by the OT, the prince of Moab clearly could not serve as a model for the martyr. Neither did Jephthah's daughter become a popular model, though Origen mentions her as a predecessor of the martyrs.<sup>26</sup>

In Christianity, Isaac becomes the type of Christ and not that of the martyr, but none the less he is present in martyrology, too. In the previous chapter I have argued that even if the story of Polycarp shows in certain details great similarity to that of Jesus and is therefore considered in general as a typical specimen of the *imitatio Christi*, the scene of his death is modelled deliberately after the Aqedah rather than the gospel narrative of Christ's death.

A 4<sup>th</sup>-century homily even depicts Isaac as a bride. When he learns that he is to be sacrificed he answers with these words:

Prepare a blooming bridal chamber, my parents,  
Twine my fair hair in braids, my fellow-citizens,  
That I may perform a holy offering with a generous mind.<sup>27</sup>

He proceeds to his death as a young girl to her wedding, just as Antigone did in Sophocles,<sup>28</sup> Iphigeneia and Polyxena in Euripides, or the Christian martyrs Blandina<sup>29</sup> and Agnes.<sup>30</sup> This demonstrates very clearly the close relation between Isaac who is sacrificed by his father, the tragic heroines who go voluntarily to death, and the martyrs.

We have to emphasize that the parallel between the Aqedah and martyrdom is based on the presumption that Isaac's sacrifice was voluntary. As this motif is absent from the NT, Christian authors evidently borrowed it from Jewish tradition.

Several modern authors, for example Levenson and Bergmann, have tried to derive the sacrifice of Christ and that of the martyr from OT child sacrifices. As I have argued in connection with Christ I am not convinced if

<sup>26</sup> Origen, *Commentarium in evangelium Johannis* 6.54.277; see below, ch. 7.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Hilhorst, "The Bodmer Poem on the Sacrifice of Abraham," 98.

<sup>28</sup> Sophocles, *Antigone* 891.

<sup>29</sup> *Letter of the Churches of Lyons and Vienne* 1.55.

<sup>30</sup> Ambrose, *Hymn* 8.4.

this parallel is justified. Neither could I detect any direct relation between martyrdom and child sacrifice, the most important difference being that the latter is not presumed to be voluntary.

Considering OT human sacrifices, as well as human sacrifice in general, it is clear that mainly those cases could serve as models for martyrdom which were voluntary or could be interpreted as such.

There is, however, one motif which originates in the OT and survives in martyrology, namely the use of the term “holocaust.” In the OT all the three aforementioned cases (the prince of Moab, Jephthah’s daughter, Isaac) are designed as *‘olāh* (burnt offering, Gen 22.2,3,6,7,8; Judges 11.31; 2 Kings 3.27), translated by the LXX as ὁλοκάρπωσης (Gen 22.2,3,6,7,8) or ὁλοκαύτωμα (Judges 11.31; 2 Kings 3.27). This word (which is not applied to Christ in the NT<sup>31</sup>) when used in reference to the martyr establishes a direct relation between OT human sacrifices and martyrdom.

## GRECO-ROMAN AND CARTHAGINIAN HUMAN SACRIFICES

The martyrdoms of Dasius and Caesarius were clearly modelled after alleged human sacrifices offered yearly to Saturn and to Apollo respectively (which in both cases are depicted as more or less voluntary). Though these sacrifices were not real, the fact that Christians know about regular sacrifices (whether real or not) offered to gods, as for example on the occasion of the feast of Jupiter Latiaris, facilitated their acceptance of martyrdom and their understanding of it as a sacrifice offered (not to some demonic being but) to the true God.

This is particularly true for Carthage, where, as it seems, the practice of human, mainly child, sacrifice, was wide-spread and survived even up to Christian times. Establishing a relation between these sacrifices and martyrdom was especially easy because, according to the Carthaginian ideology, the sacrifice could be effective only if the victims submitted themselves freely and joyfully, and this attitude was expected even of small children. For Tertullian, and probably for the Carthaginian martyrs also, it was quite natural that every god should have his share of human sacrifice.

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<sup>31</sup> Later authors, however, sometimes call Christ, too, a holocaust, see *PGL* 949.

## NOBLE DEATH

The literary models for the behavior of martyrs are very often the classical heroes who deliberately submitted themselves to death. Recently, as we have seen above, some scholars have tried to derive martyrdom from the classical “noble death” tradition and it has been suggested that the martyr’s burning desire for death was influenced by the well-known examples of Roman “noble death.” On the basis of our investigations we cannot agree with this unreservedly. It is true that the outward appearances are often similar (the martyr’s contempt for death and suffering), yet the motivations are completely different. With noble death religious motifs play almost no role. The philosopher or statesman chooses death when he cannot continue to live in accordance with his code of living. His death is neither a sacrifice nor a religious act and his motifs are strictly personal: he prefers to die nobly instead of living wretchedly or submitting himself to his enemy. He dies for truth, honor, human dignity or even for love,<sup>32</sup> but not for god. He awaits no special prize; at most he hopes for a certain fame among posterity. The martyr wants to die not because his life has become unbearable but because, on the one hand, he is convinced that God requires from him this sacrifice and, on the other hand, because he wants to assure for himself eternal bliss.

Notwithstanding this, we have seen that the description of the martyr’s behavior was often influenced by the *topoi* of the noble death tradition (e.g. Ignatius, Polycarp), and his comportment and speeches before the tribunal fit the paradigm we have called “defying the tyrant.”

The “noble death” tradition was especially strong in Carthage where numerous earlier cases of suicide committed for some noble reason are recorded (Dido/Elissa, Hamilcar, Hasdrubal’s wife etc.). Tertullian puts these, along with Lucretia, Heraclitus, Empedocles, Regulus and so on, as examples before his brethren when exhorting them to martyrdom and argues that if many people accepted death and torture for the sake of worldly glory how much more is it rewarding to accept them for celestial glory. In this case the similarity between noble death and martyrdom consists in the quest of (worldly or celestial) glory.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Tertullian includes Cleopatra among those who died in a noble way and are therefore examples for the martyrs, *Ad Martyras* 4.6.

<sup>33</sup> Tertullian, *Ad Martyras* 4.4–9.



The influence of these stories of noble death can be observed very clearly in Perpetua's death. The narrator not only makes her the successor of those intrepid women who freely ended their life by their own decisions, but even makes her surpass Lucretia.

## THE SELF-SACRIFICE OF THE HERO

As we have sought to demonstrate, the self-sacrifice of the hero for his country became an important model for Christian martyrology, having already influenced Jewish martyrology (the death of the Maccabean martyrs; Isaac and Jephthah's daughter transformed into Euripidean heroes).

Bergmann gives a very thorough analysis of the changes Iphigeneia underwent in Euripides and concludes: "At this point an important transformation occurs in Greek tradition, which will also occur in Judaism and Christianity: the sacrificial victim becomes a voluntary martyr."<sup>34</sup> In fact, in Euripides she did not become a martyr but a heroine, and it needed a further step for her to be transformed from heroine into a model for martyrs. This step was first taken, as far as we know, by *LAB*, where Jephthah's daughter speaks and behaves like Iphigeneia and Isaac like Menoeceus.

Later on, those mythical or historical heroes who offered themselves for the sake of their communities made their triumphal march into Christian martyrology, and Christian authors presented them as models for their readers.<sup>35</sup>

Several motifs of the "heroic death" originating with Euripides (and later gaining a widespread popularity) found a secure place in the literary descriptions given in the martyr acts about the martyr's condemnation and death. To mention some characteristic traits: the victim pronounces long harangues before dying; he does not let himself be bound; he/she offers freely his/her neck or bosom (or both) to the executioner; the female martyr goes to death as if it were her wedding; while dying she takes care that her gown should cover her body in a decent way; the executioner is embarrassed, while those who are present are stupefied at the sight of such heroism. Moreover, it is quite evident that Iphigeneia and Polyxena served as models for Agnes, the prototype of the virgin martyr.<sup>36</sup> Hence Iphigeneia, and in a

<sup>34</sup> Bergmann, *In the Shadow of Moloch*, 57; cf. above, ch. 2, 46.

<sup>35</sup> See below, Conclusions, 168–69.

<sup>36</sup> On this see in detail Pesthy-Simon, "From Euripides to the Christian Martyrs," 337–46.

lesser measure Polyxena, survive in Christianity under the form of the virgin martyr. Here again, as in the case of Isaac, we can follow closely the transformation: human sacrifice → voluntary self-sacrifice → martyrdom.

The underlying concepts are also quite similar: the divinity is offended by the sins committed by his worshippers and consequently visits them with some disaster (plague, drought, persecution) which can be stopped only through the death of one or a number of blameless victim(s). In order to diminish the responsibility of the divinity, the victim has not only to consent to being offered but even to rejoice in it.

But beside the similarities there are some differences, too. The hero dies for the sake of the community and his personal interests remain in the background. In the case of the martyr the interests of the community, if present at all, play hardly any role and the personal point of view dominates.

A special case of heroic self-sacrifice is the Roman *devotio* which likewise influenced martyrology: we have seen this in connection with Ignatius and it appears very clearly in the case of Caesarius. This latter, however, is reminiscent also of the myth of Curtius. As Heyman has observed, *devotio* becomes part of the martyrological language of Cyprian, who for the most part depicts martyrdom as a cosmic battle waged against the Roman emperor and Satan.<sup>37</sup>

## MACCABEAN MARTYRS

It is very easy to detect similarities between Maccabean and early Christian martyrology, but it is much less easy to prove the direct influence of the former on the latter, and not only because the dating of *4 Macc.* is problematical, but also because *4 Macc.* and even *2 Macc.* show clearly the influence of Hellenistic ideas about heroic and noble death. Some scholars have argued for the influence of Maccabean martyr accounts on the *Letters of Ignatius*, the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* and the *Martyrdom of Perpetua*, but in none of these cases can the influence be demonstrated with certainty. It is, however, true that the successors of the Maccabean martyrs were not (only) the Jews but also the Christians. The Maccabean martyrs became Christianized and were considered as predecessors of the Christian martyrs.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Heyman, *The Power of Sacrifice*, 212–13.

<sup>38</sup> On this see e.g. Hadas, *Heroes and Gods*, 94.

## SCAPEGOAT

Though martyrs are often in truth scapegoats made responsible by the Romans for every calamity, they are not represented as such in Christian texts. As scapegoats (or *pharmakoi*) were mostly ignoble persons on whom the sins of the whole community had been loaded, it can be easily understood that this image did not suit the image of the unblemished hero the martyrologists wished to present in their reports at all. Traces of the *pharmakos* ritual can, however, be detected in the cases of Dasius and Caesarius.

## THE SUFFERING SERVANT

Here our investigation has yielded only negative results: it seems that the Suffering Servant did not become a model for the Christian martyrs.

## ANIMAL SACRIFICES

It is rather rare that a martyr's death is directly compared to an animal sacrifice; in some cases, however, the parallel is quite evident. Polycarp is called "a noble ram,"<sup>39</sup> Blandina, when she is "offered in sacrifice," is treated like an animal (she is put into net and exposed to a bull).<sup>40</sup> Mark, the legendary founder of the Church of Alexandria, was, according to the story, dragged through the entire city with a rope around his neck, while his torturers mockingly called him a "bull." At the end of the day he was brought to a place called the "Cattle-field." Next day he was dragged through the streets of the town again until he died.<sup>41</sup> All this happens on the feast-day of Serapis. In such cases the martyrs replace the animal sacrifices offered to the gods, just as Demonax in Lucian describes himself as a garlanded animal to be sacri-

<sup>39</sup> *MPol.* 14.1.

<sup>40</sup> *Letter of the Churches of Lyons and Vienne* 1.56 (Musurillo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, 81).

<sup>41</sup> The *Acts of Mark* (dating probably from the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> or beginning of the 5<sup>th</sup> century) are preserved in two Greek versions. The first is edited in *PG* 115, cols. 164–69, the second in *Acta Sanctorum* 12: April, 3, 346–349; see also the Ethiopic version of his legend in Dillmann, *Chrestomathia Aethiopica*, 19. For the other versions see Pearson, "Earliest Christianity in Egypt," 140, n. 37.

ficed.<sup>42</sup> And we must not forget that martyrs died in the arena just like the wild animals put on show there.

The terminology used for the martyr's sacrifice (*thuō* – *thusia*, *prospherō* – *prosphora*, *immolare*, *sacrificare*) is the same as in the case of animal sacrifices.

## CONCLUSIONS

Ignatius wants to die just as a philosopher is presumed to die, and the author of *MPol.* represents the death of his hero as a new Aqedah, a perfect holocaust offered by Christ as the high priest (cf. *MPol.* 14). Other Christian writers chose other models: Agnes dies as Iphigeneia and Polyxena did in Euripides; Thecla, the 'protomartyr,' behaves in the apocryphal *Acts of Paul and Thecla* as the heroines of Hellenistic novels did<sup>43</sup>—her story being a love-story where *erōs* is replaced by *agneia*<sup>44</sup> (naturally, Thecla's interest goes all to Paul, and not to Christ); Perpetua, who goes her own way against the will of her family and finally consummates her own death by directing the dagger of the gladiator to her throat<sup>45</sup> has for predecessors such Carthaginian heroines as Elissa, the founder of Carthage, and the wife of the general Hasdrubal. Tertullian, in his *Ad martyras*, put these figures (along with other classical examples of 'noble' suicide such as Lucretia, Heraclitus, Empedocles and even Cleopatra) before his Christian readers in order to excite them to martyrdom.<sup>46</sup> Origen exhorts his readers to martyrdom by evoking the self-sacrifice of Jephthah's daughter.<sup>47</sup> The *Acts of Montanus*

<sup>42</sup> In the case of Demonax this is only a figure of speech as in reality he is not sacrificed, see Seeley, *The Noble Death*, 139–41, and above, ch. 2, 59, 66.

<sup>43</sup> It is clear that the *Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles* (AAA) show great similarities with the Hellenistic novel; Streete calls them simply "Christian popular novels", see Streete, *Redeemed Bodies*, 3; and Peter Brown writes of them as follows: "The Christian authors of the Apocryphal Acts had only to replace a manifest destiny to the wedding bed ... by the Apostle's call to continence", *Body and Society*, 155.

<sup>44</sup> Park, "AGNEIA as a Sublime Form of ΕΡΩΣ in The *Acts of Paul and Thecla*," 215–26.

<sup>45</sup> *Martyrdom of Perpetua* 21. 9 (Musurillo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, 131), see above.

<sup>46</sup> Tertullian, *Ad martyras* 4.4.

<sup>47</sup> Origen, *Commentarium in evangelium Johannis* 6.54.276–78.

and *Lucius* praise the mother of Flavianus, one of the future martyrs, as a “Maccabean mother.”<sup>48</sup> The story of *Dasius* is pieced together from different (historical, mythical and literary) elements: the feast of Saturnalia with its king, the descriptions of Sakaia, the *pharmakos* ritual and the myth of the hero sacrificing himself for his country.<sup>49</sup> As we see, in the same martyr story several models can be used and several paradigms can intermingle.

We could continue this enumeration, but this much should suffice to prove that the hagiographers, in order to represent the martyr as heroically as possible and to make the story as interesting as possible, used all the available former heroes (Jews, Greeks, Romans, Egyptians and Carthaginians, mythical or historical) who died in some “noble” way (meaning anything from human sacrifice—Isaac—to suicide). Christ was only one of these heroes, and we have to admit, from this point of view not even the most interesting one.

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<sup>48</sup> Ch. 16, similarly the *Acts of Marian and James* 13.

<sup>49</sup> *Martyrdom of Dasius* (Musurillo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, 272–79).



# The Meaning of the Martyr's Sacrifice

## PRELIMINARY REMARKS

In the previous chapter we examined martyrological texts which conceived the martyr's death as sacrifice and we argued that if it is a sacrifice it must be a human one.

In this chapter we shall try to evaluate the martyr's sacrifice: what does it mean? Why is it necessary? What is its aim? Who benefits from it? Our analysis will be based, on the one hand, on the texts treated earlier (we shall quote other martyrological texts, too, when necessary); on the other hand, we shall also take into consideration the statements of such Christian writers as Tertullian, Origen and Cyprian and others on these matters.

In order to understand the sacrifice of the martyr, we must first understand the persecutions. We are not interested, it must be restated, in the historical facts,<sup>1</sup> but in the interpretations Christians gave of them; to put it succinctly, we are looking for the "theology of persecution."

According to early Christian writers the persecutions were launched against the Christians by Satan and his demons<sup>2</sup>; they always hated those who were just, so it is natural that they hate the Christians even more.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Cf. above, at the beginning of ch. 5. As for the historical facts regarding in what measure Christians actually *were* persecuted see lately the provocative book of Moss, *The Myth of Persecution*. See also the fundamental work of Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution*.

<sup>2</sup> Justin, *2 Apologia* 6(7).2; Tertullian, *Apologeticus* 27.4; Minucius Felix, *Octavius* 27.8.

<sup>3</sup> Justin, *2 Apologia* 7(8).2.

Christ, through his victory over the powers of evil, has deprived Satan of his subjects and has weakened him; because of this Satan now leads a desperate combat against those who are no longer his.<sup>4</sup>

But naturally, all the Christian writers agree that this could not happen without God's permission or against his will. As to the question why God wants or at least permits the persecutions and all the horrors connected to it, the answer is that he wants either to punish or to test his "soldiers," or both. Tertullian explains that Satan is only the executor of the divine intention, which aims at testing the faith of the believer.<sup>5</sup> Thus he arrives at the conclusion that persecutions are good, because they come from God and no evil can originate from him; hence it is not permitted to flee before persecutions (contrary to the order of Jesus, cf. Mt 10.23).<sup>6</sup> For Lactantius the persecutions are at the same time punishments for previous sins and the means of discipline to keep the soldiers of God in good form. A military commandant cannot test the courage of his soldiers except against the enemy. An earthly general always has enemies, but nobody can oppose God; therefore God himself raised adversaries, to fight not against him, naturally, but against his soldiers.<sup>7</sup> For Minucius Felix<sup>8</sup> and Cyprian<sup>9</sup> the persecutions serve to test and to purify the believers. Pionius explains to his fellow captives that God has delivered the Christians to Satan because of their sins that he might sift them like wheat (cf. Lk 22.31); "But let no one imagine ... that the Lord has failed, but rather we, ourselves."<sup>10</sup> Eusebius considers the great persecution

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Tertullian, *Apologeticus* 27.7.

<sup>5</sup> Tertullian, *De fuga* 2.1–3.

<sup>6</sup> Tertullian, *De fuga* 4. In *Scorpiacae* 5.1 Tertullian argues that by prohibiting idolatry God explicitly wanted martyrs.

<sup>7</sup> Lactantius, *Divinae Institutiones* 5.22.17.

<sup>8</sup> Minucius Felix, *Octavius* 36.9: "... Deus nec non potest subvenire nec despicit, cum sit et omnium rector et amator suorum, sed in adversis unumquemque explorat et examinat, ingenium singulorum periculis pensitat, usque ad extremam mortem voluntatem hominis sciscitatur, nihil sibi posse perire securus. Itaque et aurum ignibus, sic nos discriminibus arguimur." (Cf. Baumeister, *Genèse et évolution de la théologie du martyre*, 136.) Minucius Felix uses the Old Testament image of gold tested by fire.

<sup>9</sup> "Persecutio ista examinatio est adque exploratio pectoris nostri. Excuti nos Deus voluit et probari, sicut suos semper probavit, nec tamen in probationibus eius aliquando auxilium credentibus defuit" (Cyprian, *Epistula* 11.5.3). Cf. Cyprian, *Ep.* 11.5.1; 11.6.1. Cf. Pesthy-Simon, *La théologie de la tentation*, 107, n. 2.

<sup>10</sup> *Acts of Pionius* 12.13 (trans. Musurillo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, 153).



under Diocletian as a punishment for the sins of the Christians who have become completely dissolute under the "little peace of the Church" and committed all sorts of sins.

Whatever God's reasons may be, he expressly wants persecutions and along with them martyrs, and he decides who should be martyred and when and how.

After these preliminaries, we must now turn to the central question: what is the meaning of the martyr's sacrifice? First of all we must realize that we cannot look for an unequivocal answer as the texts vary greatly in their understanding of the term 'sacrifice.'<sup>11</sup> In this chapter we shall categorize the different meanings of the martyr's sacrifice such texts offer, examine certain aspects of it and finally sum up the conclusions we can draw.

## THE MARTYR'S DEATH AS EXPIATORY SACRIFICE

"This unique transformation of the meaning of self-sacrifice in martyrdom into an actual offering is a way of depicting the Christian martyrs not only as witnessing the truth of their belief in Christ but also emulating him as an offering to God, while their self-sacrifice has the same purifying and atoning impact as his," writes Halbertal.<sup>12</sup> In fact, this is only partly true, and while some texts actually attribute a "purifying and atoning impact" to the martyr's death, others do not.

The atoning sacrifice of Christ has abolished the sins of the world and the Christian participates in it through baptism. But what happens if later he commits grave sins? In the first centuries there was no other method to gain absolution from them than by the "baptism of blood," namely martyrdom, which effaces all sins whatever they may have been, as it is stated for example in the *Shepherd* of Hermas,<sup>13</sup> by Origen,<sup>14</sup> by Tertullian<sup>15</sup> and by

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<sup>11</sup> See also the interesting analysis of the question by Moss, *The Other Christs*, 77–87, a work which has been useful to me on several points, although she leaves human sacrifices completely out of consideration.

<sup>12</sup> Halbertal, *On Sacrifice*, 60.

<sup>13</sup> Hermas, *The Shepherd: Similitudines* 9.28.3: "the sins of all those who suffered ... for the sake of the name of God's Son were effaced."

<sup>14</sup> Origen, *Exhortatio ad martyrium* 30; *Homiliae in librum Iudicum* 7.2; *Commentarium in evangelium Matthei* 16.6.

<sup>15</sup> Tertullian, *De anima* 55.4–5.

Cyprian.<sup>16</sup> It is another question (which we shall not treat here) how martyrs misused the fact that after having confessed they could do whatever they pleased. Thus the martyr's death expiates first of all his own sins. But as Moss justly remarks, in the martyr acts "sacrificial language is never used to describe the removal of the martyrs' sins."<sup>17</sup> Indeed, this motif appears nowhere in the texts mentioned above. The martyrs presented in them are superhuman heroes, not poor sinners like everybody else.

The martyr's death, however, can atone not only for the martyr's own sins but also for those of others. Ignatius in his letter declares several times that he offers himself for (or: "instead of?") others,<sup>18</sup> and calls himself *antipsuchon* (ἀντίψυχον, 'substitute, fee') or *peripsēma* (περίψημα, which means 'offscouring, contemptible thing' but also 'expiatory sacrifice' or 'ransom'). Polycarp's martyrdom, according to his hagiographer, "put a stop to the persecution" (*MPol.* 1.1).<sup>19</sup> Eleutherus wishes to become a "libation (σπονδή) and sacrifice (θυσία) for those who are tormented because of God" (*MEleuth.* 21). In the *Martyrdom of Marian and James* the martyrs pay with their own blood (13.5). But the meaning of these expressions is not clear either in the case of Ignatius or Marian and James, so it would be audacious to affirm that the death of these martyrs was considered as ransom for the sins of others (of which no mention is made).

The interpretation of the martyr's death as an expiatory sacrifice for the sins of others is found first of all not in the martyr acts but in the writings of the early Christian theologians.

### Origen

Among the church fathers it is first Origen who attributes expiatory effect to the martyr's sacrifice. In his *Against Celsus* he states that it is in the nature of things that the voluntary death of a just man should have an expiatory effect:

...who was crucified yesterday or the day before yesterday and deliberately endured this kind of death for the sake of humanity is similar

<sup>16</sup> See also the examples in Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians*, 435, 458. For Cyprian see Heyman, *The Power of Sacrifice*, 210–13.

<sup>17</sup> Moss, *The Other Christs*, 246, n. 67.

<sup>18</sup> E.g. Ignatius, *Eph.* 8.1: ἀγνίζομαι ὑπὲρ ὑμῶν; cf. *Trall.* 13.3; *Eph.* 21.1; *Pol.* 2.3; 6.1; *Smyrn.* 10.2.

<sup>19</sup> Musurillo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, 3.

to those who died for their homeland in order to stop the devastating plague, the dearth or the shipwrecks. It appears that in the nature of things there is a kind of natural law, the reasons of which are mysterious and remain hidden before the majority, that if a just man willingly dies for the sake of the community, through his expiatory sacrifice he drives away the evil demons who cause plagues, dearth, difficulties of sailing and other similar things (*Contra Celsum* 1.31).

The passage draws a parallel between the death of Christ and earlier voluntary sacrifices. It is not clearly stated to whom the "just man" offers the expiatory sacrifice; it would be logical to suppose it was those demons "who cause plagues, dearth, difficulties of sailing and other similar things."

The atoning character of the martyr's sacrifice is clearly expressed in the *Exhortation to Martyrdom*: "As Jesus redeemed us through his precious blood (cf. 1 Pet 1.19; Rev 5.9), ... thus perhaps the precious blood of the martyrs will also redeem some...."<sup>20</sup> Origen even worries what will happen when there will be no more martyrs: "Therefore I am afraid that when there will be no more martyrs and the sacrifices of the saints will not be offered any more there will be no remission of our sins."<sup>21</sup>

Origen explains this salvific effect of the martyr's sacrifice in a passage of utmost importance in his *Commentary on John* (6.54.264–83). In connection with the five animals offered on the altar according to the OT, a young bull, a sheep, a goat, a turtle dove, a pigeon, Origen begins by stating that the Lamb of God is the man Jesus (6.54.264–73). Then he continues:

(276) The remaining sacrifices, of which those relating to the law are akin to this sacrifice. But in addition, the other sacrifices akin to this sacrifice seem to be the shedding of the blood of the noble martyrs. It was not in vain that the disciple John saw them standing beside the heavenly altar (Rev 6.9). ...

(277) Now to comprehend, even if to a limited extent, the more spiritual sense of such sacrifices which cleanse those for whom they are offered, one must understand the sense of the sacrifice of the daughter of Jephthah who was offered as a holocaust because of the vow of him

<sup>20</sup> Origen, *Exhortatio ad martyrium* 50.

<sup>21</sup> Origen, *Homiliae in Numeros* 10.2.

who conquered the children of Ammon. She who was offered as a holocaust consented to this vow ...

(278) Such accounts give an appearance of great cruelty to God to whom such sacrifices are offered for the salvation of men. We need a generous and perceptive spirit in order to refute the reproaches made against providence and at the same time, to make a defense of all the sacrifices insofar as they are rather mysterious and beyond human nature ...

(279) But it has also been attested among the pagans that many delivered themselves as victims for the common good when destructive diseases were rampant. The faithful Clement ... accepts and not without reason, that those things happened in this way because he believed in the histories (Clement of Rome, *Letter to the Corinthians* 55.1)

(280) The things prescribed concerning the martyrs also have a similar absurdity in the judgement of one who wishes to denounce the mysteries which elude most people. For it pleased God that we submit to all the most painful tortures while confessing his divinity rather than we be delivered from what are thought to be such great evils for a short time by accommodating ourselves in speech to the will of the enemies of the truth.

(281) We must hold, therefore, that a dissolution of maleficent powers occurs through the death of the holy martyrs. The martyrs' endurance and confession until death, and zeal for godliness blunts, as it were, the sharpness of their treachery against the sufferer. Consequently, when their power is blunted and exhausted there are many others, in addition, who have already been conquered who are set at ease because they are freed from the weight with which the attacking evil powers were opposing and harming them.

(282) In addition, those who would have suffered if those who inflict wicked things on others had not been exhausted, no longer experience suffering since he who has offered such a sacrifice has conquered this adverse power. The following illustration is useful, at least in part, in relation to what I have just said. He who destroys a venomous animal or lulls it to sleep with a charm, or by some power empties it of venom, benefits many who would later suffer something from it, if it had not been destroyed or lulled to sleep, or emptied of its venom.

(283) Moreover if one who had earlier been bitten should become aware that there is a deliverance from the harm caused by the bite if he

should fix his gaze on the animal which injured him dying, or tread on its corpse, or touch it when dead, or taste some part of it, the healing and kindness from him who destroyed the harmful animal would affect him also who had suffered earlier. We must conceive that something like this occurs in the death of the most godly martyrs, since many are benefited from their death by some ineffable power.<sup>22</sup>

Let us summarize the argumentation of Origen: 1. The OT animal sacrifices are the symbols of the new human sacrifices (Christ and the martyrs); 2. the martyr's death is similar to that of Jephthah's daughter and of those classical figures who in great distress sacrificed themselves in order to save the others; 3. all these persons consented to being killed; 4. these sacrifices are offered to God "for the salvation of men"; 5. God expressly desires the suffering and death of the martyrs; 6. this gives "an appearance of great cruelty to God"; 7. in fact, the martyr through his sacrifice defeats the evil powers, hindering them from harming others or even making them release those whom they already have in their power. It is not clear whether the harm caused by the demons means physical suffering or instigation to sin; both are possible, but for Origen the main occupation of the evil powers consists in raising passions in human beings and inducing them to sins. Origen's idea is probably that the defeated demons are much less able to induce men to sin and even those who formerly were sinners are liberated from their domination—this would be the meaning of the expiatory sacrifice of the martyr's death.

### *Prudentius*

The other Christian writer who emphasizes the beneficent effect the martyr's death exercises on the community is Prudentius. In his *Peristephanon* (book 4) he glorifies his town, Caesaraugusta, because of her martyrs: "The sacrifice of holy blood (*sacer immolatus sanguis*) has shut out the race of malign devils from all thy gates and driven back darkness from thy cleansed city. No shuddering fear of spirits lurks within, for the plague has been driven away in flight from thy people, and Christ dwells in all thy streets, Christ is everywhere" (4.65–72).<sup>23</sup> The martyr's blood, however, did not only purify the town from the demons in their time, but would save it even on Judgment

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<sup>22</sup> Transl. Heine, Origen, *Commentary on the Gospel, According to John, Books 1–10*, 243–45.

<sup>23</sup> Transl. Thomson, *Prudentius* 2, 161.

Day<sup>24</sup>: “Cast thyself down along with me, noble city, on the holy graves, thou and all thy people; then when their souls and bodies rise again thou and all thy people will follow them” (4.197–200).<sup>25</sup>

### *Other church writers*

We find similar ideas also in Gregory of Nyssa and John Chrysostom.<sup>26</sup> The former turns the death of Stephen into an expiatory sacrifice.<sup>27</sup> The latter calls ‘salvific’ (σωτήριον) the blood of the martyrs because it frightens the devil invoking against him the blood of the Lord.<sup>28</sup> According to Chrysostom the martyrs Peter, Paul and Ignatius purified with their own blood the town which was defiled by the blood of sacrifices offered to the idols.<sup>29</sup>

Let us note the ambiguity of the aforementioned explanations: according to all these Christian writers (Origen, Prudentius, Gregory of Nyssa, John Chrysostom) the martyr’s death is beneficial for others because through their sacrifice offered to (and required by) God they conquer the demons. The ancient paradigm (whether OT or classical) was somewhat simpler: the benefit (cessation of the plague, granting of a wish) came from the same divine being to whom the sacrifice was offered.

The martyr’s death as expiatory sacrifice can be effective on two levels: it liberates other persons either from earthly punishment (persecution) or from otherworldly ones.

### *Popular beliefs*

Whatever the hagiographers and theologians thought, popular belief, as it seems, attributed already at a very early time the power to forgive sins to martyrs.<sup>30</sup> As Lane Fox states: “In a vivid comment on fellow Christians’

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<sup>24</sup> Concerning the ideas of Origen and Prudentius see Petruccione, “The Martyr Death as Sacrifice,” 245–57. We will not enter into the debate whether Prudentius depends on Origen or not. I can very well imagine that there is no connection between the two authors.

<sup>25</sup> Transl. Thomson, *Prudentius* 2, 169.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Petruccione, “The Martyr Death as Sacrifice,” 14.

<sup>27</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *Encomium in s. Stephanum protomartyrem* (CPG 3187), PG 46, col. 721–36.

<sup>28</sup> John Chrysostom, *De sanctis martyribus* 2 (CPG 4365), PG 50, col. 709.

<sup>29</sup> John Chrysostom, *In Sanctum Ignatum Martyrem* 4 (CPG 4351), PG 50, col. 593.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. e.g. Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians*, 448–59.

worldliness, queues soon formed around the martyrs cells. We have no idea when this practice began and we have no ground for confining it to any particular region.”<sup>31</sup> It appears perhaps already in the *Letter of the Martyrs of Lyons*: “...they loosed all, but bound none” (2.5). Tertullian raises his voice against those sinners and adulterers who visited the martyrs in prison in order to obtain absolution<sup>32</sup> and knows of Christian women who kissed the fetters of the martyrs.<sup>33</sup> According to him, the martyr's death effaces only his own sins, not those of others. But the general conviction remained that martyrs had the power to give absolution. Theoretically, this power belonged only to those who actually died after having confessed, but in reality not all the confessors died. Notwithstanding this, they still continued to give absolution. We know from the letters of Cyprian that in Carthage during the persecution of Decius confessors gave notes of remission by the thousands (and to make things even more complicated, not all the “confessors” were genuine). As Lane Fox characterizes the situation:

The confessors dispensed certificates, the authorities dispensed certificates. Prudent Christians needed both: one from the authorities to avoid death, one from the prisoners to avoid hell. The confessors wrote to each other, the bishops wrote to the confessors and plied other confessors with copies. Christians, meanwhile, forged every one of these papers with the utmost abandon. They bought certificates; they coaxed and seduced confessors; they wrote letters as if from their bishop and gave pardons in other confessors' names.<sup>34</sup>

What counts for us is that the strong belief in the martyr's and confessor's power of obtaining absolution for others is based on the understanding of the martyr's death as an expiatory sacrifice, just as in Judaism the Aqedah was supposed to atone for all the past, present and future sins of the Jews.

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<sup>31</sup> Cf. Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians*, 448.

<sup>32</sup> Tertullian, *De pudicitia* 22, cf. *Ad uxorem* 2.4.1; *Ad martyras* 1.6; *De paenitentia* 9.4; *Scorpiacae* 10.8; cf. Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians*, 753. n. 48.

<sup>33</sup> Tertullian, *Ad uxorem* 2.4.1.

<sup>34</sup> Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians*, 459.

## THE MARTYR SACRIFICED TO THE PAGAN GODS; MARTYRDOM INSTEAD OF SACRIFICING TO THE PAGAN GODS

So far we have argued that martyrs considered themselves or were considered by the hagiographers as (voluntary) sacrifices offered to God or Christ. Martyrs, however, were seen as sacrifices not only by Christians but also, at least in certain cases, by their Roman executioners, who meant to offer them to their “pagan” gods. This aspect of the “sacrificial paradigm” seems to have been rather neglected.

In the first two centuries there were no centrally organized persecutions, only local conflicts which led to the hunting down and condemning of Christians. The reasons for these conflicts remain mainly hidden (we do not know why Polycarp and the Christians in Lyons were arrested), but it is clear that when a region was stricken by famine, plague or drought, Christians could very easily become scapegoats. Because they took no part in Roman religious cults they were supposed to have aroused the anger of some god who, in consequence, punished the whole community.<sup>35</sup> The communities, therefore, hoped to appease the wrath of the offended divinity through the killing of Christians. This represents not simply the punishment of sinners but a religious act. It is generally accepted that the death sentence originates from ritual killing, even if its religious character was later forgotten and it became simply an instrument of worldly legal practice. But we must not forget that in ancient Rome religion permeated the whole fabric of social and political life, instead of being a separate domain of life as in modern societies. A criminal condemned to death became *sacer*, in other words, someone who does not belong to the profane sphere anymore.<sup>36</sup> As Christians were executed because they threatened the social order by refusing to participate in the Roman cult, their execution consequently served to re-establish this social and, at the same time, religious order; and so it had a religious meaning, too. Naturally, this does not mean that the executioners and the spectators were always conscious of the religious character of the events taking place before them.

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<sup>35</sup> Cf. Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians*, 419–26.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. above ch. 2, 50.



The death of the martyr was always a public event: it took place in the arena, just like the gladiatorial combats and the executions of criminals, and served as a spectacle for pagans and Christians alike. In recent years a number of studies have investigated the social, political, cultural and religious significance of the Roman arena, and while some of them deny it any sacrificial or ritual significance, several argue for a sacrificial interpretation.<sup>37</sup>

According to Futrell the *munera* must be interpreted as a sacrificial ritual. She sees in the gladiatorial combat a foundation sacrifice, the ritual enacting of Remus' death:

The suspicion that gladiatorial combat is a form of human sacrifice affects our assumptions about the social institution symbolized by the amphitheater. I propose that the amphitheater was a politicized temple that housed the mythic reenactment of the cult of Roman statehood. The struggle of the gladiator embodied an idealized and distilled version of the military ethic of *Romanitas*. His death served as a foundation sacrifice that answered the crisis of empire, validating the Roman struggle for power and offering a model for understanding the basis of Roman power.<sup>38</sup>

The impetus for and the explanation of *munera* comes from the essence of *Romanitas*, its nature stretching far back into Rome's mythohistorical past to the struggle of Romulus and Remus over the foundation of the City. The death of Remus can be interpreted as a foundation sacrifice, vital and necessary to the protection of the city and its future well-being.<sup>39</sup>

The *munera* are a variant on the ritual combat/sacrifice theme, where the victim becomes the property of the gods who granted his victory [the victory over the victim].<sup>40</sup>

For Plass, the gladiators and prisoners killed in the arena are ritually offered human sacrifices which assure the restoration and maintenance of the social order:

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Futrell, *Blood in the Arena*, 205; see the thorough overview of the different sacrificial interpretations by Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory*, 107–11.

<sup>38</sup> Futrell, *Blood in the Arena*, 170.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 207.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 208.

*Munera* were a somewhat different proposition [than political suicide]. Dealing with essentially external threats from man or beast, they were public and corporate in nature and therefore more heavily ritualized. By way of contrast to the *introjection* of violence through political suicide, bloodshed in the arena was a more positive, fully socialized projection of power and expulsion of danger. As danger is marginalized in the person of the victim, violence is set apart ritually to be viewed as spectacle. *Munera* were rituals in a fairly strong sense of the word. Ritual, of which theatricality is a defining property, typically appears where social order is breached, and it eliminates anomaly by coming to terms with it—"entertaining" it—through stylized mimicry and rehearsal.<sup>41</sup>

Salisbury also argues for a ritual meaning in connection with the Carthaginian arena where Perpetua was martyred:

... Romans took the games very seriously and surrounded them with ritual significance.<sup>42</sup>

Criminals (or traitors to the state) would be sacrificed so that the state would be strengthened. The strengthening was more important on a symbolic level than on any practical level ...<sup>43</sup>

A space reserved to make such significant statements about power, life, and death could hardly help but be sacred, particularly because Roman religion was so space conscious. Yet, the space of the arena was not considered sacred simply because it was there. In fact, there were specific ritual activities that made the space of the arena sacred to pagans.<sup>44</sup>

We can add one more interesting detail (not mentioned by the authors quoted above) in support of the ritual significance of the gladiatorial games, namely the *sacramentum gladiatorum*,<sup>45</sup> which shows certain similarities with the formula of *devotio* spoken by Publius Decius Mus.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>41</sup> Plass, *The Game of Death in Ancient Rome*, 136.

<sup>42</sup> Salisbury, *Perpetua's Passion*, 120.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 121–22.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

<sup>45</sup> Quoted above in ch. 5, 123 in connection with Ignatius.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. Barton, "Honor and Sacredness," 29.

Certain statements of the ancient authors also support the opinion that gladiatorial games were a survival of human sacrifice. Tertullian writes: "For at one time, since it was believed that the spirits of the dead were propitiated by human blood, they used to sacrifice at funerals captives or purchased slaves of low quality. Afterward it was decided to cover up the impiety with pleasure. So then on the appointed day they put those whom they trained (such training! they learnt to die!) to use before the tombs of the dead."<sup>47</sup> Similarly Servius (ca. 400 AD): "The custom was to kill captives at the tombs of great men. Because this, after a time, seemed cruel, it was decided that gladiators should fight before the tombs."<sup>48</sup>

The true origins of gladiatorial games will probably remain hidden, and we cannot decide in what measure they were considered as religious events by participants, spectators and executioners. In our case the understanding of these events is complicated by the fact that they are always related by Christians from their own point of view and we cannot expect them to give an objective image of the pagans' feelings and ideas concerning the death of the martyr in the arena.

In the previous chapter we have, nevertheless, encountered some cases where the connection between martyrdom and human (or non-human) sacrifice to the gods was quite obvious. The nature of this connection can be of different kinds:

- Perpetua and her companions, as well as the martyrs of Lyons, were considered by their executioners, as it seems, as sacrifices to the gods. When north Africa was stricken by a plague in 252 the Christians became scapegoats because they had allegedly broken the *pax deorum* and it was even demanded that Cyprian should be cast to the lions as a sacrifice to Apollo.<sup>49</sup>
- Dasius and Caesarius became martyrs *instead* of being human sacrifices to the gods.
- Blandina, when she is "offered in sacrifice" (*Letter of the Churches of Lyons and Vienne* 1.56), is treated like an animal (she is put into net and

<sup>47</sup> Tertullian, *De spectaculis* 12.2–3.

<sup>48</sup> Servius commentarius in Vergilii *Aeneida* 10.519; cf. Futrell, *Blood in the Arena*, 205–6.

<sup>49</sup> Cyprian, *De mortalitate* and *Epistula* 59.6.1; cf. Baslez, *Les persécutions*, 288.

exposed to a bull)<sup>50</sup> and Mark, according to legend, is dragged with a rope about his neck through the whole city like a bull.”<sup>51</sup> In these cases the martyrs substitute for the animal sacrifices offered to the gods, in other words, human beings are offered instead of animals to appease divine wrath or simply to please the gods.

Heyman situates martyrdom in the sacrificial order of the Roman Empire and argues that martyrs, by refusing to participate in it, disturbed this order and became themselves sacrifices: “Rather than offer sacrifice on behalf of the emperor, they were willing to become the sacrifice themselves.”<sup>52</sup> This, again, is only partly true. It is evident that many Christians were indeed martyred for not participating in the Roman sacrificial cult, but we actually encounter the motif of self-sacrifice instead of the offering of a pagan sacrifice only by Euplus in his *Acts* and Pamphilus/Papyrus in the *Acts of Carpus, Papyrus and Agathonike*. In these cases the martyr’s death becomes a liturgical sacrifice to God. In a great part of the texts examined above the martyrs are not condemned to die for refusing to sacrifice to the emperor or to the gods but for being Christians and for confessing themselves to be Christians. Sacrificing to the emperor and the Roman gods or refusing to do so became central only from the Decian period onward; the “sacrificial paradigm,” however, is present also in much earlier sources.

## MARTYRDOM AS MEANS OF ASCENDING TO HEAVEN

Conon arrives before God as an offering (προσφορά) and Polycarp prays to be received “as a rich and acceptable sacrifice” (ἐν θυσίᾳ πρίονι καὶ προσδεκτῇ). As Moss states: “In the case of both these martyrs their sacrifice serves a personal instrumental function as the means by which the martyr is translocated to heaven.”<sup>53</sup> (Which does not contradict the fact that Polycarp’s death had an expiatory effect and put an end to the persecutions.) The personal point of view is even more pronounced with Agnes: martyrdom means for her the hotly desired union with Christ described by Prudentius

<sup>50</sup> See above in ch. 5 and 6, 132, 167–68.

<sup>51</sup> See above in ch. 6, 167.

<sup>52</sup> Heyman, *The Power of Sacrifice*, 176 (cf. 164–65). Castelli’s view is quite similar, cf. *Martyrdom and Memory*, 50–52.

<sup>53</sup> Cf. Moss, *The Other Christs*, 85.

with very direct sexual imagery. This leads us to the next topic, which likewise merits some comment.

## THE GENDER OF THE MARTYR

It is a well-known fact that according to Christian martyrology martyrs, whether men or women, were supposed to behave in “manly” fashion, and Perpetua’s vision, in which she is transformed into a young man and fights in this form against the Egyptian,<sup>54</sup> is one of the most famous passages of early martyrological literature. Castelli, after analyzing a number of passages from Clement of Alexandria, quotes also Origen who represents the martyrs as fathers<sup>55</sup> and observes: “The martyr’s death is masculine death, even when (or perhaps especially when) it is suffered by a woman.”<sup>56</sup> This, however, is only one side of the problem, and the other side also merits some consideration. First of all, we should note that the martyrs are not only fathers but sometimes also mothers, as in the example of the Maccabean mother. Thus we read concerning Blandina: “...like a noble mother encouraging her children, she sent them before her in triumph to the king...”<sup>57</sup> But our real interest goes to a special group of martyrs of which Agnes is the prototype: the virgin martyrs.

In chapters 2 and 3 we listed a number of cases in which young (and mostly noble) boys were offered as human sacrifices or sacrificed themselves voluntarily, and at the end of chapter 3 we emphasized the importance of this especially precious kind of sacrifice. In Christianity it found a place of honor in the form of the virgin martyrs. The similarity between Agnes (and through her all virgin martyrs), on the one side, and such human sacrifices as Iphigenia and Polyxena, on the other side, makes this continuity quite evident.

In the early centuries virginity played no role in connection with the martyr. Perpetua, for example, was married and had a child, Felicity gave birth to a child, while of Blandina we learn nothing. Virginity gains ground during the fourth century with the emergence of the ascetic ideal and it is not

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<sup>54</sup> *Martyrdom of Perpetua* 10.

<sup>55</sup> Origen, *Exhortatio ad martyrium* 14, quoted by Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory* 66 (unfortunately without giving the exact reference).

<sup>56</sup> Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory*, 62.

<sup>57</sup> *Letter of the Churches of Lyons and Vienne* 1.55 (Musurillo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, 79).

surprising that virgin martyrs also appear on the scene then. It might perhaps have been expected that adolescent martyrs of both sexes should have featured; this, however, is not the case. While with Agnes a very popular paradigm came into being, we look in vain for her masculine counterpart. It is true that, since Origen, the human soul is (symbolically or not) the bride of Christ, and this is equally true for masculine as well as for female souls. A beautiful example of a young boy becoming the bride of Christ is Isaac as described in the Bodmer homily quoted above. Here we have just the exact opposite of Perpetua becoming a man.

## SACRIFICIAL TERMINOLOGY

Hagiography applies practically the entire terminology of sacrifice to the martyrs. We can debate whether this should be understood metaphorically or not, but the relations between martyrdom and pagan or ancient Israelite sacrificial practice are clear. For Origen, the sacrificial animals enumerated in the OT (bull, lamb, goat, dove, turtle) mean allegorically the saints and martyrs whose blood must be shed from time to time for the purification of the others.<sup>58</sup>

In connection with this we have to emphasize that whatever term is used for the martyr's sacrifice (*thuō*—*thusia*, *prospherō*—*prosphora*, *immolare*, *sacrificare*), even if it is the same as in the case of animal sacrifices, or even if the martyr is paralleled with an animal, his death still remains a human sacrifice, simply because he is a human being. Here again we should note, just as we did concerning the sacrifice of Christ, that martyrdom takes the place of earlier animal sacrifices, in other words, instead of animals it is human beings that must be immolated.

## SUFFERING AS SACRIFICE

Martyrs not only have to die, they have to suffer as well. Here again, we can rely only on the descriptions given by the hagiographers, so it is impossible to determine the borderlines between reality and phantasy. Were the martyrs actually tortured as described in the martyr narratives? As far as Roman

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<sup>58</sup> Origen, *Commentarium in evangelium Johannis* 6.54.264–83, see above, 175–78; cf. Origen, *Homiliae in Numeros* 24.1.

practices in executing criminals are concerned we may presume that martyrs were indeed forced to suffer, but it is also evident that the martyrological texts are full of exaggerations. While early acts describe the death of the martyr in a very succinct way (e.g. *Acts of Justin and Companions*; *Acts of Cyprian*), later texts abound in gruesome details. We are surely not supposed to believe that martyrs were tortured over the course of several weeks and meanwhile their bruised bodies regenerated over and over again or even that the martyrs died and returned to life several times only to be able to endure further tortures. But whatever the truth may be, it is evident that martyrology attributes a very great value to suffering: martyrs have (and want!) to suffer as much as possible, the more the better because the reward will be also greater.<sup>59</sup> But why did suffering receive such a positive meaning?

In ancient Israel, Greece or Rome, the creatures to be sacrificed, whether animal or human, are always killed in a swift and relatively painless way; the victim is not required to suffer, and first and foremost it has to remain intact and unblemished. The same is true for voluntary sacrifices. The biblical as well as the classical accounts concerning these events are very discreet about the last moments of the victim; they often content themselves with simply alluding to what really has happened (cf. Judg 11.39: "... she returned to her father [Jephthah], who did with her according to the vow he had made"—this laconic statement became the starting point of endless disputes as to the character of the sacrifice<sup>60</sup>; similarly in Euripides the death of the victim is reported in a very succinct way).

For the Greeks and Romans suffering had no expiatory value. It can be punishing (e.g. Prometheus). Or it can have educative intentions (παθεῖν—μυθεῖν): pains and difficulties serve to train the philosopher. It can also occur that someone's suffering becomes a lesson for others.<sup>61</sup> Suffering in these cases does not lead to death. There are a few stories reporting someone's death under torture and expressing admiration for his courage in enduring pain (the philosopher Zeno [4<sup>th</sup>–3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE] or Anaxagoras [5<sup>th</sup> century BCE]), but these stories are found mostly in relatively late sources. Glorious death needs to happen in a swift and clean manner so that the body should remain intact and beautiful. A tortured and mutilated corpse was dis-

<sup>59</sup> Cf. Saturninus in the *Martyrdom of Perpetua*, 19.2 quoted above in ch. 6, 158.

<sup>60</sup> See above ch. 1, 19–20.

<sup>61</sup> Williams, *Jesus' Death*, 137–40.

gusting and surely could evoke repugnance, not admiration.<sup>62</sup> Suicide is even permitted to avoid a slow and painful death.

Judith Perkins argues that “[i]n the late Hellenistic period and the early Roman empire, the suffering body became a focus of significant cultural concern and this gave rise to the creation of a new subjectivity—the self as sufferer.”<sup>63</sup> Her point is that “the representation in early Christian narratives of a community of sufferers and the persecuted worked not simply to represent a realistic situation so much as to provide a self-definition that enabled the growth of Christianity as an institution,”<sup>64</sup> mainly because with the help of the martyr discourse “things that had universally been thought bad and contemptible, such as pain and death, were suddenly seen as valuable...”<sup>65</sup> Perkins is probably right in stating that around the turn of the millenium a certain change took place in classical thinking as a result of which the body with all its weaknesses and pains received much more attention than it had before (see e.g. the medical texts), and this change of mentality made Christianity with its obsession for suffering more understandable and acceptable. Perkins’ arguments, however, do not explain the Christian predilection for suffering, but this was probably not her aim (though she remarks that “it could have been otherwise”).<sup>66</sup> She leaves completely out of consideration the biblical and early Jewish background to Christian ideas about suffering and does not seem to recognize the importance of voluntarily accepted pain.

In chapter 3 in connection with the Maccabean martyrs we followed up the transformation which took place in Jewish thinking—how at the end of the OT period and in early Judaism suffering received positive evaluation as a means of purification, testing or even expiation. Thus we observe that as time goes on suffering gains ground more and more: it receives a positive value whenever endured during life and increases the merit of voluntary death.<sup>67</sup> Christ, too, in order to redeem humanity, had not only to die but to suffer. Ignatius was the first to speak of the “passion” (*pathos*) of Christ, meaning his suffering as well as his death: “...unless we freely choose to die

<sup>62</sup> Baslez, *Les persécutions*, 149–52.

<sup>63</sup> Perkins, *The Suffering Self*, 7.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>67</sup> See above ch. 3, 79–81, 96.



into his suffering, his life is not in us" (*Magn.* 5.2).<sup>68</sup> Ignatius expresses here the general Christian conviction: the followers of Christ have to participate in the suffering of Christ,<sup>69</sup> and if necessary, in his death. Ignatius speaks of "freely" choosing (αὐθαρέτως) suffering and death: martyrdom is valuable only if voluntarily accepted. In this way the importance of suffering becomes understandable: the more pain the martyr has to endure, and endure willingly, even gladly, the greater his sacrifice will be.

Let us note that we find similar ideas among the Romans, too. "Surely the gods looked with pleasure upon their pupil as he made his escape by so glorious and memorable an end,"<sup>70</sup> writes Seneca about Cato, who thrust his sword through his body and when the physician tried to bind it up he tore the wound open again. Likewise, Seneca states of Regulus, tortured to death by the Carthaginians: "But the greater his torture is, the greater shall be his glory."<sup>71</sup> In these cases the death of the hero becomes more glorious because of the voluntarily accepted or even consciously (self-)inflicted suffering, just as it happens with the martyrs.

As to the gruesome details abounding in martyrological texts we must not forget that the aim of these narratives was not only to educate but also to entertain the believers, and the descriptions of successfully endured torments were probably enjoyed by readers and hearers alike.

## WHO BENEFITS FROM THE MARTYR'S DEATH?

As every religious act is directed either at God, or at the community, or at the individual person, so in the case of martyrdom conceived as sacrifice, we have also to ask ourselves who benefits from it: God, the community or the martyr himself?

God, as we have seen, rejoices over martyrdom and expressly demands it. Only those may be regarded as true martyrs who are called by God to this trial.

The martyr's death is sometimes considered useful for the community as atonement, but this motif appears mainly in such Christian theologians as Origen, while it is quite rare in the martyr narratives. In these latter, if the

<sup>68</sup> Cf. Perkins, *The Suffering Self*, 189.

<sup>69</sup> Cf. πάθημα, in Bauer, *Wörterbuch zum NT*, col. 1194–95.

<sup>70</sup> Seneca, *De providentia* 2.12, quoted by Drodge and Tabor, *A Noble Death* 35; see above, ch. 2, 65.

<sup>71</sup> Seneca, *De providentia* 3.9, quoted by Seeley, *Noble Death*, 119.

martyrs are of any benefit for their communities, it is mostly as examples for others.

The true beneficiary of the martyr's sacrifice is the martyr himself. After death, he ascends unhindered directly to heaven or to Paradise,<sup>72</sup> where he will sit beside Christ and reign and judge together with him.<sup>73</sup> The martyr is supposed to have in the otherworld a quite privileged position which surpasses not only that of other believers but perhaps even that of the angels.<sup>74</sup>

His act is, therefore, motivated first of all by personal reasons: the fear of punishment in the otherworld and the hope for reward,<sup>75</sup> and, above all, the desire to be with Christ. In the introductory chapter we remarked that, with the appearance of "voluntariness," the character of sacrifice changes: the victim's personal point of view gains ground. Here we can clearly see the end of a process in the course of which, as Stroumsa puts it, sacrificial ritual "was transformed from an alliance between the community and its gods into the preparation of a mystical experience."<sup>76</sup> In case of the martyr the sacrificer, the sacrifice and the beneficiary of the sacrifice are one and the same person—so that we need to ask ourselves if this can be called 'sacrifice' at all.

In the previous chapters, while examining the different cases of human sacrifice (whether voluntary or not), we always asked the question who offered the sacrifice to whom, and we had to acknowledge that the answer was, to tell the truth, not always easy. It became especially difficult concerning those passages of the NT according to which God delivers his Son (to himself?). Otherwise, to whom did Christ pay the ransom? To the devil or to God? The opinions of early Christian writers diverge on this point.

In the case of the martyr the situation is quite clear: the martyr offers himself to God, sacrifice and sacrificer are identical, and the executioner plays no

<sup>72</sup> Cf. the visions in *The Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas*, ch. 4 and 11; Origen, *Homiliae in librum Iudicum* 7.2. The others, even the just, have to wait until the Judgment Day, at least according to Tertullian. Opinions on this point diverge among early Christian writers.

<sup>73</sup> Concerning the range of heavenly rewards awaiting the martyrs see Moss, *The Other Christs*, 113–47.

<sup>74</sup> Moss argues that the martyr was sometimes considered as *alter Christus*, cf. *The Other Christs*, 149–76; cf. above *Introd.*, 6.

<sup>75</sup> Cf. Moss, *The Other Christs*, 143: "The knowledge that they escape judgment serves as a focal point for the martyrs' attention and a motivating factor behind their deaths."

<sup>76</sup> Stroumsa, *The End of Sacrifice*, 58.

role. As Castelli puts it: "It is as though, in this sacrificial economy, the realities of the world recede altogether while the crucial exchange between faithful humans and the sacrifice-accepting divine takes center stage."<sup>77</sup>

The protagonists of the case studies presented in the chapter 5 became martyrs mostly on their own initiative: Ignatius definitely wants to die, Agnes secretly escapes from home to become a martyr, many others denounce themselves to the authorities, Agathonike throws herself on the pyre and so on. In these cases the "exchange" (to use Castelli's term) actually takes place between the self-sacrificing human and the sacrifice-accepting divinity; persecutors and executioners play very little role, or even none at all (as e.g. in the case of Agathonike's self-destruction). The martyr wishes to obtain the crown, in other words, heavenly glory and the earthly fame connected to it; the executioners are only the indispensable (?) elements of this process.

Eutychius (877–940, Melkite patriarch of Alexandria), relates that in Capadocian Caesarea during the persecutions launched by Licinius forty Christians were thrown into a pond filled with ice-cold water. One of them got out of the water and tried to hide himself on the shore in a tent. The tent, however, collapsed and he was killed. At this moment, the head of the guards who were supervising the execution saw forty crowns descending from heaven and settling on the heads of the martyrs. One crown, however, remained over. Seeing this, the head of the guard came to believe in Christ and immediately throw himself in the icy water in order to catch the crown which had no owner.<sup>78</sup>

The martyr's crown functions here as an especially valuable lottery prize. No wonder that Christians, according to the legends, would do everything possible to obtain it. The high point is reached perhaps in the story of Julius of Aqfahs, a supposed Egyptian martyr. According to one legend, Julius was the author of several martyr acts. During Diocletian's persecution in Alexandria he cared for the martyrs, who prophesized to him: "Your blood must be shed for the name of our Lord, the Christ and you will be counted among the martyrs." This prediction had to come true, even if meanwhile the

<sup>77</sup> Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory*, 53.

<sup>78</sup> See Arabic text: Eutychii patriarchae alexandrini *Annales*, ed. Cheikho, 122–23. The story of the Forty Martyrs is related by several Christian writers (e.g. Gregory of Nyssa, *Encomium in XL martyres*, I–II, CPG 3188–89, PG 46, 749–88; Basil of Caesaria, *In quadraginta martyres Sebastenses*, GPG 2863, PG 31, 508–23 etc.). But the crowns descending from heaven are mentioned only by Eutychius as far as I know.

persecutions were over and the reign of Constantine had begun. Julius visits one of the governors of Upper Egypt who tortures and executes him because of his faith. He resurrects and performs great miracles, so that the governor is converted and they go together to the next governor. The same happens again, and the three of them, accompanied with great many servants go to the third governor. Here, finally Julius is able to win the promised crown of martyrdom in the following way:

The saint Julius turned to Alexandros, governor of Tuw and said to him: "Make an end to my combat and order that my head be cut off so that I may receive the martyr's crown and arrive to my Lord Jesus Christ." Alexandros answered him: "I will not condemn you, nor do you any harm." Julius gave orders to his five hundred servants, and they draw their swords and threatened Alexandros with these words: "If you do not order that the heads of all of us be cut off so that we may become holy martyrs of Christ, we shall kill you." Then Julius ordered an evil spirit to take possession of Alexandros, and it took immediately possession of him and he wrote the order that the heads of the saints should be cut off and the heads of all of them were cut off with the sword. ... The number of those who became martyrs along with saint Julius on the day of his martyrdom is 1500. And all of them received the crown of martyrdom in the heavenly kingdom.<sup>79</sup>

Julius, instead of being the helpless victim of persecution, acts rather as the triumphant Lord whom earthly and unearthly powers equally obey.

We can dismiss the whole story by noting that Julius probably never existed and, with Delehaye, calling the Coptic martyr legends in general a "miserable literature"<sup>80</sup>; but the fact remains that Julius is a venerated saint of the Coptic (and Ethiopic) church up to this day.<sup>81</sup>

These examples show how the martyr's "sacrifice" could degenerate into a simple and, from the martyr's point of view, very lucrative transaction between man and God. Persecutors and executioners are here of no importance. In the story reported by Eutychius they play no role at all, while in the

<sup>79</sup> *Le synaxaire arabe Jacobite*, ed. Basset, 290–92. English translation by the author.

<sup>80</sup> Cf. Delehaye, *Les Martyrs d'Égypte*, 81.

<sup>81</sup> Cf. [http://www.copticchurch.net/synaxarium/1\\_22.html#2](http://www.copticchurch.net/synaxarium/1_22.html#2) (the most savoury details are wisely omitted).

case of Julius it seems to be a condition *sine qua non* of his "martyrdom" that he should be killed by others. In the old martyrological texts the executioners were led by the devil; here the devil sides with Julius and helps him to obtain the much-desired crown.

## MARTYR AS OVERACHIEVER

Martyrs are "overachievers"<sup>82</sup> who not only unite in themselves all former "heroes" but must even surpass them (Christ included). All the paradigms of "sacrificing to" and "sacrificing for" are applied to the martyrs. Halbertal's *On Sacrifice* demonstrates how in antiquity the idea of "sacrifice to" was turned into the idea of "sacrifice for" and recognizes the importance of Christian martyrdom in this process: "The understanding of martyrdom itself as an actual offering of the self to God served as a crucial link."<sup>83</sup> We can agree entirely with Halbertal's argument, especially because he considers martyrdom as an *actual* sacrifice and not as a metaphorical one; but perhaps we can state the consequences of his argument in a somewhat more pointed form. In Christian martyrdom "to sacrifice to" and "to sacrifice for" coincide: the victim sacrifices himself *for* God and at the same time *to* God, which is contrary to every former sacrificial ideology. People normally offer sacrifices to the divinity because they want to obtain something or because they had already obtained something (out of gratitude or as the fulfilment of a vow). Even if a sacrifice is simply a "gift," it is offered in the hope of return.<sup>84</sup> In the case of self-sacrifice a person offers himself to the divinity for the sake of others (Menoeceus, Iphigeneia, Codrus, Decius etc.). Before the formation of Jewish and Christian martyrology it was unconceivable that somebody should die *for* god.

The "gift cycle" naturally works also in the case of the martyr: by offering himself to God he is assured of receiving the fit reward, namely eternal bliss. And the accent begins to shift: the martyr is eager to die not for the sake of God (though naturally he is convinced that his act pleases God) nor for others, but in order to receive the greatest possible reward the soonest possible. The martyr's crown becomes a hotly desired privilege and Christians not only press to be martyred themselves but pray the Lord that he

<sup>82</sup> Cf. Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians*, 419, 444–45.

<sup>83</sup> Halbertal, *On Sacrifice*, 59; see above Introd., 3.

<sup>84</sup> "The goal of sacrifice is to produce a gift cycle," Halbertal, *On Sacrifice*, 8.

should grant this to their companions. Thus we read concerning Agapius and Secundinus in the *Martyrdom of Marian and James*: “So great in them was the spirit of grace and life that it was not enough that they were to devote their own precious blood to a glorious martyrdom; they wished to make others martyrs by the inspiration of their own faith”<sup>85</sup>; Montanus, before dying, prays to the Lord that Flavian should follow him on the third day,<sup>86</sup> which indeed happens; Potamiaena, an Alexandrian martyr, “pays back” the kindness of Basilides<sup>87</sup> by interceding after her death with the Lord that he too should be martyred and this grace is naturally granted to her: she herself puts the crown on his head in a vision and shortly afterwards he is actually executed.<sup>88</sup>

Here again things have turned: while the classical hero offered himself so that others could live, the Christian “hero” prays that others should die as well; and while the dead hero is presumed to help others in their lives, the dead martyr uses his or her interceding capacities in order to send others to their death.

## VICTIMS OR VICTORS

Many languages apply the same word to a sacrifice offered to God and to the victim of a crime (e.g. the German ‘Opfer’). In English the term ‘victim’ also has this double meaning, but beside it ‘offering’ and ‘sacrifice’ are also used. Classical Hebrew, Greek and Latin distinguished the two notions, and Halbertal argues that their later identification was possible because of the victim’s innocence.<sup>89</sup> I would add that the word ‘victim’ taken in the second sense implies that someone is exposed to some atrocity against his will (the victim of an accident is not supposed to have intentionally provoked the accident in order to die in it).

<sup>85</sup> *Acts of Marian and James* 3 (Musurillo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, 197).

<sup>86</sup> *Martyrdom of Montanus and Lucius* 15 (Musurillo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, 229).

<sup>87</sup> Basilides is the soldier who leads Potamiaena to her execution; at this point, he is probably already a Christian.

<sup>88</sup> *The Martyrdom of Potamiaena and Basilides* 3–7 (Musurillo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, 132–34).

<sup>89</sup> Halbertal, *On Sacrifice*, 33.

Human sacrifices were originally victims, in other words, innocent beings killed by others. But when sacrifice becomes voluntary this also changes. Iphigeneia and Polyxena are truly victims, even if they agree to be killed, but what about Menoeceus or Decius? The same is true for the martyrs. Polycarp is a sacrifice to God and victim of the persecutions at the same time, but are Ignatius, Euplus, Agathonike or Agnes also victims? The martyrs of Lyons are victims of a local persecution and they are considered by their executioners as sacrifices to the "pagan" gods; nonetheless, they are victors, too, because through their martyrdom they triumph over Satan. Or to be exact: Christ suffers in them and triumphs through them over the powers of evil.

Here we come to a change of paradigm in the interpretation of the martyr's death. In our Introduction we noted that according to Candida Moss "martyrdom as sacrifice" is only one of the models used to interpret the martyr's death, and perhaps even not the most important one. She distinguishes two other paradigms beside this, "martyrdom as cosmic battle" and "martyrdom as model." The third one does not seem to me an independent paradigm, as all martyrdom accounts were meant to present their heroes as models for others. Thus we are dealing with two partly contradictory, partly complementary models which we can call the sacrificial paradigm and the victorious paradigm. According to the second, the martyr by his suffering and death defeats the powers of evil.

In (early and also later) Jewish martyrology the sacrificial paradigm prevails, and the same is true for early Christian martyrology. The "cosmic battle" motif is absent from the *Letters of Ignatius* and also from the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*.<sup>90</sup> It appears for the first time in the aforementioned *Letter of the Churches of Lyons and Vienne* and is elaborated by Tertullian<sup>91</sup> and Origen.<sup>92</sup> The two paradigms do not exclude one another: the martyr can be considered at the same time as sacrifice and as victor over the demons (see *Letter of the Churches of Lyons and Vienne* or Origen's *Commentary on John* 6.54.264–83) Later, in the third and fourth centuries, the victorious paradigm becomes increasingly popular, particularly in Latin hagiography,<sup>93</sup> while the

<sup>90</sup> See above 127, n. 46.

<sup>91</sup> Cf. Tertullian, *Ad Martyras* 1–2.

<sup>92</sup> Cf. Origen, *Commentarium in evangelium Johannis* 6.54.281; *Contra Celsum* 8.42 etc.

<sup>93</sup> Cf. Moss, *The Other Christs*, 101.

sacrificial one is relegated to the background even if it still appears in such a late text as the *Acta Caesarii*.

Bertholet finds astonishing how long the conviction could persist that God delights in the sacrifice offered to him.<sup>94</sup> In fact, this conviction still persists and probably will never fade; only the nature of the sacrifice changes. The idea that the true Christian believer must, if necessary, sacrifice himself to God and for God survived through the ages and survives as yet. This sacrifice does not necessarily involve martyrdom, though martyrdom is by no means excluded<sup>95</sup>; but it can take place through renunciation, ascetics and self-denial also.

And along with it the other, very deep-rooted idea also survives that for the sins of mankind God can demand a certain quantity of innocent human blood, and this quantity can be quite considerable. Thus the tsunami of 2004 was interpreted by some Catholic priests and also by Protestant fundamentalists as the manifestation of divine wrath because of the ever increasing sinfulness of men. Unless we suppose that the more than two thousand victims of the tsunami were more sinful than everyone else, which seems rather absurd, then they must be considered as human sacrifices.

## VOLUNTARY SACRIFICE OR SUICIDE?

Human sacrifices were put to death by a person qualified to perform this task. When this sacrifice becomes “voluntary” the situation changes: voluntariness can be anything from accepting the inevitable to committing suicide. Menoeceus kills himself but, despite this, his sacrifice remains valid, it “works.” Codrus, however, had recourse to a ruse in order to get himself killed; had he just killed himself, his sacrifice would have been of no avail.

The same uncertainty can be observed in martyrology. The notion of martyrdom as we have understood it from the beginning implies that the person to be martyred consciously accepts his fate, that he has the choice either to submit to it or to save his life. Therefore martyrdom is always a voluntary act. But the notion of voluntariness can have a very wide range of meaning, as we can observe on the basis of the examples presented above: 1. Dasius has to die anyway; his only choice is to decide whether he offers himself to Jupi-

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<sup>94</sup> Bertholet, *Wörterbuch der Religionen*, 439 (s. v. “Opfer”).

<sup>95</sup> In the textbook of ethics used in Hungarian schools for 10-year-old boys and girls it is stated that the greatest act of courageous men is martyrdom.



ter or to Christ; 2. Christians often were arrested somehow (it is not known how and why) by the Roman authorities and then before the tribunal proudly confessed their faith; 3. others did not wait to be arrested, but presented themselves before the authorities with the declaration: "I am a Christian"; 4. some actually committed suicide (Agathonike, the head of the guard in Eutychius). Just as in the case of human sacrifice, suicide constitutes a special problem: are those who kill themselves disqualified from becoming martyrs or not? In earlier times, though not everybody agreed, the answer to this was mostly negative and suicide was an accepted way of becoming a martyr.<sup>96</sup> Later on, mostly because of the Donatist controversy, the attitude of mainstream Christianity changed. We saw that the *Acta Caesarii* is probably a polemic against the Donatists' habit of throwing themselves down from cliffs. Julius of Aqfahs moves heaven and hell to get himself martyred; the only thing he cannot do (and which would be the simplest solution) is to kill himself.

As Drodge and Tabor have shown, early Christianity had no unequivocal opinion about suicide and its categorical condemnation, in vigor up to this day, originates only with Augustine.<sup>97</sup> But the categorical and unbending condemnation of suicide does not interfere with the veneration of such martyrs who, like Agnes, presented themselves before the tribunal in order to get themselves killed.

## HUMAN SACRIFICE *contra* MARTYRDOM

The martyr, as we have seen, offers himself to God voluntarily in the hope of an otherworldly reward. But what about God? Should we expect of him that he should rejoice in such a sacrifice? At practically the same time as a "theology of martyrdom" was coming into being the apologists did not tire of affirming that God had no need of sacrifices.

Christian writers agree that the persecutions are ordained by God, and in consequence God expressly desires a certain number of Christians to become martyrs. Origen, in order to defend Christian martyrdom refers to former voluntary (pagan) human sacrifices: "It has been recorded also by the nations that, when plagues have befallen them, many persons offered themselves to be slain for the sake of the community."<sup>98</sup> Or in connection

<sup>96</sup> This question is treated in detail by Middleton, *Radical Martyrdom*.

<sup>97</sup> Drodge and Tabor, *A Noble Death*, 167–89.

<sup>98</sup> Origen, *Commentarium in evangelium Johannis* 6.54.279, see above 176.

with Jesus' death: "It appears that in the nature of things there is a kind of natural law ... that if a just man willingly dies for the sake of the community, through his expiatory sacrifice he drives away the evil demons who cause plagues, dearth, difficulties of sailing and other similar things."<sup>99</sup> Clement of Rome (mentioned also by Origen) put these stories of self-sacrifice as examples before the divided Corinthian community: "... in times of pestilence, many kings and rulers, being prompted by some oracle, have given themselves over to death, so that they might rescue their subjects through their own blood" (*Letter to the Corinthians* 55.1–5).<sup>100</sup> Neither Origen nor Clement states who the addressee of the sacrifice was: the victims gave themselves up to be slaughtered or simply to death. The most convenient solution would be to suppose that the sacrifices were offered to the demons themselves who were responsible for all these troubles. And indeed Philo of Byblos (quoted by Eusebius) declares: "It was a custom of the ancients in great crises of dangers for the rulers of a city or nation, in order to avert the common ruin, to give up the most beloved of their children for sacrifice as a ransom to the avenging daemons; and those who were thus given up were sacrificed with mystic rites."<sup>101</sup>

While "pagan" voluntary sacrifices (offered to whom?) are praised, human sacrifices in general are most rigorously condemned: "Let us now demonstrate that your gods are inhuman and man-hating demons who rejoice not only about the folly of men but even delight in slaughter and in the gladiatorial games which take place in the stadiums ... and striking down on cities and nations in the form of plagues they require godless libations," writes Clement of Alexandria,<sup>102</sup> and there follows a copious list of previous human sacrifices. Hughes notes: "Clement concludes by saying that human sacrifice is murder, which does not become a holy act simply because the slaughter is offered to a deity and performed in a sanctuary or 'upon altars rather than in the streets' (*Protrepticus* 3.42)."<sup>103</sup>

Similarly Eusebius: "How could we affirm that it [human sacrifice] is agreeable for the good demons when it can be that only for the most unclean

<sup>99</sup> Origen, *Contra Celsum* 1.31, see above 175.

<sup>100</sup> English trans. *The Apostolic Fathers*, by Lightfoot, Harmer and Holmes, 117.

<sup>101</sup> Eusebius, *Praeparatio Evangelica* 1.10.44, see above in ch. 2, 56.

<sup>102</sup> Clement of Alexandria, *Protrepticus* 3.42.1.

<sup>103</sup> Cf. Hughes, *Human Sacrifice*, 119.

and destructive spirits? ... Let us prove and demonstrate how the filth of the polytheistic error reigned over human life before the evangelistic teaching of our Savior. It [human sacrifice] namely ceased and disappeared only at the time of Hadrian, when the teaching of Christ shone like light over all the places ..." (*Praeparatio Evangelica* 4.14.5–6).

As we have seen above, earlier the Romans prided themselves in just the same way for having put an end to such a barbarian practice.

Thus Christianity, on the one hand, condemns pagan human sacrifices as an appalling ritual offered to the demons and affirms that it was precisely the spreading of Christ's teaching which put an end to it; on the other hand, it legitimates a new form of human sacrifice. This inconsistent attitude has led to the paradoxical situation in which Christianity adopts and even praises such forms of behavior (when practiced within its own domains) which it most severely condemns in the case of the pagans. And this holds for the behavior of human beings as well as for that of the divinity.

Thus Eusebius, for example, strives to demonstrate to what horrors the wrongs of polytheism had led before the coming of Christ: "And it would happen that a father offered his only son to the demons or a mother her beloved daughter ... If you examine the whole history of the Greeks and Barbarians you will find that some have offered their sons, other their daughters and again others themselves to the demons as sacrifices" (*Praeparatio evangelica* 4.15.8–9).

Or similarly in Lactantius:

I cannot find language to speak of the infants who were immolated to the same Saturn, on account of his hatred of Jupiter. To think that men were so barbarous, so savage, that they gave the name of sacrifice to the slaughter of their children, that is to a deed foul, and to be held in detestation by the human race; since, without any regard of parental affection, they destroyed tender and innocent lives, at an age which is especially pleasing to parents, and surpassed in brutality the savageness of all beasts, which—savage as they are—still love their offspring! O incurable madness! What more could those gods do to them, if they were most angry, than they now do when propitious...? (*Divine Institutions* 1.21.9–11)<sup>104</sup>

<sup>104</sup> Transl. Fletcher in *ANF* 7, 34–35.

In writing these lines did Isaac's sacrifice or the death of the martyr not occur to Eusebius or Lactantius? Tertullian mocks those North African parents who offer their children to Saturn: "(they) were glad to respond, and fondled their children that they might not be sacrificed in tears" (*Apology* 9.4).<sup>105</sup> Nonetheless, the *Acts of Montanus and Lucius* praise the mother of Flavianus, one of the future martyrs, in the following way: "Her faith joined her to the patriarchs: and in this she showed herself a true daughter of Abraham in that she wanted her son to be a martyr and was even grieved with a sorrow born of pride that his passion was postponed. Ah, mother of such devoted piety! A mother to be numbered among the great saints of old! Ah, Maccabean mother!" (ch. 16)<sup>106</sup>

Similarly "Marian's mother, now sure of her son once his passion was finished, rejoicing with Maccabean joy celebrated not only Marian but also herself that she had born such a son" (*The Acts of Marian and James* 13).<sup>107</sup> In prison the pregnant Felicitas and her companions "pour forth a prayer to the Lord" that she might deliver in the eighth(!) month and thus be executed along with the others (*The Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas* 15); the Lord naturally grants them their pious request, and she gives birth to a girl. This means that the health or even the life of the baby to be born was of no importance as compared to the fact that her mother should suffer martyrdom under fitting circumstances and in good company (otherwise she would have been executed later, along with other common criminals). As far as I know, this very characteristic little detail has not been remarked upon previously and nobody has ever questioned the rightness of Felicitas' behavior.

## GOD contra DEMONS

The same double standard is applied in an even more pronounced way to the divinity. Eusebius argues that human sacrifice cannot be agreeable to the good demons, "only to the most unclean and destructive spirits" (*Praeparatio Evangelica* 4.15.5).<sup>108</sup> Clement of Alexandria similarly affirms that

<sup>105</sup> Cf. Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection*, 26.

<sup>106</sup> Transl. Musurillo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, 231 with slight modifications.

<sup>107</sup> Transl. Musurillo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, 213 with some modifications.

<sup>108</sup> See also Lactantius, *Divinae Institutiones* 1.21.

the pagan gods are “inhuman and man-hating demons ... who delight in slaughter ... and in the gladiatorial games which take place in the stadiums” (*Protrepticus* 3.42.1). But in *The Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas* we discover with some surprise that Christ appears in the role of the president of the games (Latin *lanista*, Greek ἀγωνοθέτης), that is, the person who organizes and offers the gladiatorial games (10.8), while in Tertullian God himself is the *agonothetes*.<sup>109</sup> This means that the martyr's combat is organized by God who offers it as a spectacle—presumably to a heavenly as well as to an earthly public. And naturally he himself is delighted by this combat: “What a wonderful spectacle it is for God, when the Christian braves the pain, when he confronts the threats, the sufferings and the tortures, when he scorns laughing the noise of death and the menace of the executioner,” writes Minucius Felix (*Octavius* 37.1); or according to Cyprian, the martyrs delighted the Lord with the “sublime, the great, the acceptable spectacle,” the “flow of blood which quenches the flames and the fires of hell by its glorious gore” (*Letters* 10.2–3).<sup>110</sup> God seems to behave here exactly as the aforementioned evil, man-hating demons. By the way, the latter in no way required that the victim should suffer; on the contrary, the immolation was to be accomplished in the fastest and cleanest way so that the victim should remain undefiled. As against this, the more the Christian martyr suffers the more precious he is to God. Using a somewhat vulgar association of ideas we could evoke the image of the cat who plays for a long time with the mouse so that its flesh should become the more savory—but at least we do not expect the mouse to be especially glad about it.

The Christian authors do not seem to realize how paradoxical the situation had become. Origen recognizes that willingly offered human sacrifices (whether OT or classical) and martyrdom belong to the same category and defends God by arguing that these voluntary sacrifices are necessary for the sake of the community.

Probably Tertullian is the only one who squarely faces the issue and dares to declare without more ado: the God of the Christians, just like his pagan counterparts, requires human sacrifices, but in his case these are called ‘martyrs.’ In his *Scorpiacae* he argues as follows against those who raised their voice against martyrdom:

<sup>109</sup> Tertullian, *Ad martyras* 3.

<sup>110</sup> Quoted by Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians*, 439.

But, indeed, the world has held it lawful for Diana of the Scythians, or Mercury of the Gauls, or Saturn of the Africans, to be appeased by human sacrifices; and in Latium to this day Jupiter has human blood given to him to taste in the midst of the city; and no one makes it a matter of discussion, or imagines that it does not occur for some reason, or that it occurs by the will of his God, without having value. If our God, too, to have a sacrifice of his own, had required martyrdoms for Himself, who would have reproached Him for the deadly religion, and the mournful ceremonies, and the altar-pyre, and the undertaker-priest and not rather counted happy the man whom God should have devoured? (*Scorpiacae* 7.6–7)<sup>111</sup>

The meaning of this rather difficult text can be summarized as follows: 1. it is normal that gods should be appeased through human sacrifices, whether voluntary or not; 2. nobody can reproach “our God” for wanting to have his own human sacrifices, in other words, the martyrs; 3. there is, however, no need to lament over those who are sacrificed to this god (probably contrary to those who are sacrificed to some other god) because everybody devoured by “our God” should be counted happy. The reason for all this was explained in the preceding chapter: all the sins of those who suffer martyrdom are at once effaced; martyrdom therefore is a remedy, a help granted by the merciful (not cruel!) God to sinful humanity (*Scorpiacae* 6.9–11).

Just like Origen, Tertullian tries to defend God against the charge of cruelty, and affirms that God is “good” when he requires martyrs. Their reasoning, however, is quite different: Origen compares the martyrs to the heroes who voluntarily died for their community and declares that the death of a just man has a purifying effect on the others; for Tertullian martyrdom is like all other human sacrifices (the three examples mentioned in *Scorp.* 7.6 are not voluntary at all), the only difference being that with the Christians the victim also profits from being sacrificed. According to him, martyrs are sinners like everybody else, and their sacrifice is beneficial only for themselves (the classical examples held up by Tertullian before the future martyrs in his *Ad martyras*, ch. 4, are without exception such persons who died for their honor [or because of glory, as Tertullian affirms]; there is none among them who died for the sake of others).

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<sup>111</sup> Transl.: The Writings of Quintus Sept. Flor. Tertullianus 1, ed. Robertson and Donaldson, 395.

Tertullian describes the situation with extreme lucidity in the passage quoted above: by accepting and exalting martyrdom Christianity attributed the most cruel traits of the pagan deities to their benevolent and merciful God (and even to Christ), with the only difference that the victim had to rejoice and was considered happy by others; for otherwise we could not affirm that God was "good." And in order to maintain the image of a benevolent and merciful God Tertullian created the image of an utterly sinful humanity which could be cured only by the crudest possible methods. The martyrs were not better persons than all the others, but their final struggle cancelled all their previous sins.

Let us now sum up what has come about. As we have seen, the attitude of ancient Israel, Greece and Rome toward human sacrifice was very similar: they considered it as a quite barbarian and obsolete habit categorically rejected by civilized people; notwithstanding this, in special cases they themselves accepted, exalted and even practiced it.<sup>112</sup> But we can observe a certain reserve or embarrassment as to the recipient of the human sacrifice. Versnel has shown that in the myths in which someone's (voluntary?) death is the only means to avert some threatening disaster the god demanding the sacrifice remains unnamed in a great majority of cases. The sacrifice is ordered either by "the gods" in general or by "the deities of the netherworld" or simply it is "the necessity of the nature of things." A concrete divinity (e.g. Artemis) is named mostly when the sacrifice does not take place after all (Iphigeneia in Euripides). Thus classical authors take care not to endow any of their widely respected divinities with such barbarian characteristics. As Plutarch stated: "Such a barbaric and unlawful sacrifice could not possibly please any of the gods" (*Pelopidas* 21).<sup>113</sup> Indeed, Philo of Byblos states that the addressees of these sacrifices were the "avenging demons." The Old Testament is equally discreet about the question for which divinity the children had to be "passed through the fire." It is evident that classical as well as ancient Israelite literature tried to avoid the appearance of their god(s) being thirsty for human blood.

Christianity however, by creating the cult of the martyr, openly confesses a God who expects (bloody) self-sacrifice from the faithful and

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<sup>112</sup> Scholars do not seem to have remarked upon this very hypocritical attitude, cf. above Introd., 9.

<sup>113</sup> Versnel, "Self-sacrifice," 172–73.

rejoices in it. This means that in the first centuries of its existence Christianity brought back a notion of the divinity which had been outdated for centuries and was unacceptable for the civilized world (and still clings to it by maintaining the cult of the veneration of the martyrs).

## CONCLUSIONS

On the foregoing pages I have tried to demonstrate the connections between human sacrifice and martyrdom. The two emblematic figures who constitute a link between these two kinds of violent death are Iphigeneia and Isaac. Originally both are “simple” human sacrifices (Isaac’s attitude to being killed is not reported in Gen 22; Iphigeneia, at least in Aeschylus’ play, resists with all her force); but they are later transformed into heroes who freely offer themselves ... for what? Iphigeneia allegedly for her homeland, but in reality for a wanton woman; Isaac’s reasons for offering himself as holocaust remain obscure. Later both of them become prototypes of the martyr: Isaac first in Jewish martyrology, though he appears also in Christian texts as an example of the martyr, or simply as a martyr; while Iphigeneia (along with Polyxena) becomes the prototype of the virgin martyr. These two figures demonstrate quite clearly the progression we are concerned with: (non-voluntary) human sacrifice → voluntary sacrifice → martyrdom. In Christianity, and to a lesser degree in Judaism, martyrs replace the human sacrifice of olden days: they are real sacrifices (they actually suffer and die), not symbolic ones.

Martyrs were considered human sacrifices not only by Christian hagiographers and theologians, but often by their pagan opponents as well; opinions diverged only concerning the identity of the divinity to whom the martyrs were sacrificed—to the Roman gods or to the only true God. As to the underlying ideas, there was a complete agreement between the two sides: when sins multiply and the religious order begins to deteriorate, God expresses his wrath through assorted plagues (pestilence, drought, and enemies for the Romans; persecutions for the Christians) which can be stopped only by offering a certain number of human lives. This is the ancient paradigm we have encountered in the OT and in the classical world as well.

The representation of martyrdom as sacrifice is not necessarily connected to Roman sacrificial practice (instead of sacrificing to the gods, the martyr sacrifices himself to God), but goes back rather to the ancient paradigm of voluntary self-sacrifice which, nonetheless, remains a human sacrifice. In the preceding chapters we have encountered this paradigm in many



different forms: heroic self-sacrifice for the country, noble death for one's convictions, the Euripidean heroes, the Maccabean martyrs, Isaac and Jephthah's daughter re-interpreted as voluntary sacrifices and, last but not least, Jesus' death (understood by the NT writers as a sacrifice). All of these traditions were incorporated in martyrology, and the hagiographers did their best to ensure that the martyrs, the new Christian heroes, should replace (and surpass) all the former ones.

Human sacrifices are always offered in a ritual way. When sacrifice becomes voluntary, it leaves the ritual framework, in other words, the domain of cult. In this case there are two possibilities: the sacrifice ceases to be a sacrifice (what distinguishes the death of Menoeceus and Agathonike from simple suicide?), or the domain of cult must be displaced. Jesus, too, was executed according to profane legal practice without any religious connotation. The NT authors, nevertheless, did their best to represent it as a ritualistic event. The martyr's situation is somewhat ambiguous: his death, from the Roman point of view, probably had a religious meaning, too, and in some cases it clearly took place under ritual circumstances. In other cases, however, this cannot be stated. It is hard to know if spectators and executioners attributed any religious meaning to what was going on in the arena. At least we can affirm that the martyr's death happened under officially organized circumstances (arrest, trial, verdict, fulfilment of the verdict) and before a great public. Exceptions to this are the suicidal "martyrs" like Agathonike.

We reiterate that in the religious environment in which Christianity was born human sacrifice was well known, and though considered as belonging to the remote past or to the "others," it continued to be practiced with greater or lesser frequency, mostly in cases of extreme danger. Carthaginian sacrificial practice probably influenced Carthaginian martyrology and, through it, Christian martyrology in general. Early Judaism, because of Isaac's sacrifice, showed a rather tolerant attitude toward human sacrifices. The importance of the Aqedah cannot be over-emphasized: the unquestionable prestige of Abraham, a figure shared by Jews and Christians alike, hindered (and still hinders) the treating of human sacrifice at its real value. Against this background the interpretation of Christ's death as a (human) sacrifice intended to save others was easily understandable and acceptable for new-born Christianity. This, in its turn, made the self-sacrifice of the martyrs understandable, acceptable and even desirable. In this way, through the sacrificial death of Christ and that of the martyrs human sacrifice found its place definitively in Christianity, along with the image of a blood-thirsty and sadistic divinity.



## Epilogue

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# The Developments of Martyrology after Constantine

The problem of Julius of Aqfahs was: how does one become a martyr when there are no more persecutions? Our question is somewhat similar: what directions could martyrology take when there were no more martyrs? With the Constantinian turning point the time of the martyrs is over but the underlying ideology survives: the conviction that Christians have to sacrifice themselves to God/Christ; that God/Christ expects from them this sacrifice and rejoices over it; that special rewards are awaiting those who die for God which greatly surpass the rewards of simple believers; and that the martyrs, the heroes of bygone days, are examples to follow. And the need for martyrs also persists: it is not enough to have the “old” ones; instead, every age wants to have its own martyrs.

Let us now briefly consider in which directions martyrology developed when the persecutions were over.

1. The martyrs were now replaced by the saints, the holy men and women who sacrificed themselves to God, not through (bloody) martyrdom but through asceticism, the bloodless martyrdom. Around them a vast literature came into being relating their lives, achievements, miracles and deaths, as well as the fate of their earthly remains and the miracles which these produced.

This kind of self-sacrifice still prevails and it is one of the most deep-rooted convictions of Christianity that believers have to sacrifice themselves to God. This can happen in different ways, but the essential point is the renunciation of everything pleasant. Above we have stated that martyrdom, even if it was removed from the ritual framework under which sacrifices nor-

mally were offered, happened in an organized way and before a large public and thus remained strictly regulated. But self-sacrifice through asceticism, renunciation and mortification is mostly a personal matter and left the door wide open to every exaggeration or even insane self-destruction (which often entails the destruction of others as well).

2. Martyrology as a literary genre began to flourish after the Constantinian shift<sup>1</sup>: old stories were embellished with new details, new stories were written about martyrs of whom only the name was known (e.g. Agnes), or new martyrs were invented. This is practically the same process we were able to observe in ancient Greece and Rome: as time went on heroic self-sacrifices from bygone times multiplied in literary works. And as every Greek city needed a hero to whom a cult could be devoted, just in the same way every Christian city needed a holy martyr, and if there was none, it had to be invented (as e.g. Mark in Alexandria). In later martyrological texts no place remains for historical reality; instead, the horrible and the miraculous take the upper hand. Though scholarship, beginning with the Bollandists and continuing ever since, has taught us to treat these texts on their real value, in Christian, and first of all Catholic, church practice they, along with other hagiographical texts, still exercise their influence.

Even if in the Roman Empire persecutions stopped, the possibility of becoming a martyr did not disappear completely. Within the empire the mainstream Christians persecuted those whom they labelled as “heretics”: as examples we can mention Priscillianus or the Donatists. From the “orthodox” point of view they were justly persecuted, from the point of view of their own followers, however, they were holy martyrs. From time to time Christians outside the Roman Empire were persecuted and killed (Persia, Najran<sup>2</sup>), and their martyrdom was related according to the patterns set by earlier martyrological texts.

<sup>1</sup> Harvey connects the “emergence of the martyr’s *passio* or *acta* as a highly developed literary genre” to this period, cf. “Martyr Passions and Hagiography,” 607. In fact, this literary genre existed already before the Constantinian revolution but received a new impetus after it.

<sup>2</sup> The kingdom of Ḥimyar (in the south of the Arabian peninsula) adopted the Jewish religion in the early sixth century. In 523 a great number of Christians were massacred in Najran, one of its most important towns, cf. Bowersock, *The Throne of Adulis*, 84–91; for the sources see Simon, *Meccan Trade and Islam*, 48–49; 141–42, n. 202, 250; 143, n. 218.

3. Martyrology later received a new impetus through the widening of the idea of “martyr,” with the result that it can now be applied to everyone “who died during a plague or in battle, while in action for a good cause, briefly, for everyone who, through their deaths paid the price for following Christ and for serving God.”<sup>3</sup> It is clear that with the extension of the martyr idea the sacrificial paradigm was relegated to the background; if someone dies in a plague we cannot affirm that he sacrificed himself to God. Nonetheless, the sacrificial paradigm survived through all the ages and is still flourishing, though it has also suffered important transformations. In conclusion, I shall summarize very briefly the most crucial points of this process.

- Before the Constantinian turning point Christians died for God/Christ by patiently enduring torture and execution. This kind of martyrdom survived through the ages: they were always and still are Christians who willingly suffer a violent death for their faith. But as it happens mostly in remote places, far from the “civilized” world (e.g. as missionaries), their martyrdom receives little, if any attention. As has been stated before, martyrs must be “made,” and those who died in distant countries could not be “made”: no acts or legends were written about them. Therefore, even if they were honored within a small circle (their religious order or their home town/village), no wide-ranging cult came into being around them, neither did they receive (apart from a few exceptions) papal canonization.
- The notion of martyr, and along with it the meaning of the martyr’s sacrifice, changed radically with the crusades and the ideology connected with them. “A crusader who battled against the infidels for the Christian faith and died for the cause of the Holy Land in the service of Christ the King, was entitled, according to common belief, to expect his immediate entry into the celestial Paradise and, as a reward for his self-sacrifice, the crown of martyrdom in the life hereafter.”<sup>4</sup> In fact, the Synod of Clermont in 1095 did not grant crusaders remission of sins, only remission of all other forms of penitence which the Church could have imposed them (*iter illud pro omni poenitentia reputetur*, states the second canon of the Synod), but nobody seemed to bother about the dif-

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<sup>3</sup> Slusser, “Martyrium III/1,” 210.

<sup>4</sup> Kantorowicz, *The King’s Two Bodies*, 238–39.

ference.<sup>5</sup> Even Pope Urban II speaks in his letters about *remissio peccatorum* and St. Bernard of Clairvaux urges the believers to take the cross by offering them the well-known advantageous bargain: “If you are a clever merchant, someone who makes profit in this world, I announce to you a great business; take care that you should not miss it. Take the cross and for everything you confess with a rueful heart you will immediately receive absolution.”<sup>6</sup>

The martyrs had always been called metaphorically *milites Christi*, and now they became *milites* or *athletae Christi* in the strict sense of the word: they were soldiers who killed and could be killed for the sake of Christ. The situation has now completely turned: while early Christians often became martyrs because they refused to fight, now those who fought and died fighting were considered as martyrs. This new kind of sacrifice was offered on the battlefield. This battlefield, however, was still a holy place (the Holy Land), and the crusader, at least theoretically, died for religious reasons.

- The process, however, did not end here and the *athletae Christi* were replaced soon by *athletae patriae*. As Kantorowicz has shown, during the late Middle Ages when the power of the church was declining the domain of the *sacer*—holiness—was gradually transferred from the Church to the *patria*, the homeland (led by the holy king). In 1302 when King Philip IV of France started his disastrous campaign against Flanders an unknown French cleric delivered a sermon as the king departed to war: “Since the most noble kind of death is the agony for justice,” argues the priest, “there is no doubt but that those who die for the justice of the king and realm of [France] shall be crowned by God as martyrs.”<sup>7</sup> This argumentation is based on the idea of the king’s holiness.

Martyrdom here received a new meaning: “to die for Christ” was replaced by *pro patria mori*, dying for the homeland represented by the holy king.

<sup>5</sup> Kantorowicz, “Pro patria mori in Medieval Political Thought,” 480–82; idem, *The King’s Two Bodies*, 239.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted by Mayer, *Geschichte der Kreuzzüge*, 91.

<sup>7</sup> Kantorowicz, “Pro patria mori,” 483; cf. idem, *The King’s Two Bodies*, 253.

- With the rise of Protestantism Christians in Europe could again die for their faith, the only problem being that those who killed them were equally Christians. Protestants considered their martyrs as the successors of the early Christian ones and rejected the whole medieval martyrology, first of all the ideal of the crusader, the *miles Christi*. Later on, however, Luther accepted that the war waged against the Turks was the apocalyptic battle between good and evil and those who died in it received their heavenly reward. Thus the ideal of the *miles Christi*, the soldier who kills and is killed for the sake of Christ, found its place of honor in Protestant martyrology, too. But as the protestants fought not only against the Muslims, but also against the European Catholics, and this fight was often motivated by political as well as religious reasons, the *miles Christi* was gradually transformed again into the *miles patriae*.
- In the Wars of Religion that ravaged Europe during the 16<sup>th</sup>–17<sup>th</sup> centuries a great many Christians became martyrs, killed by other Christians. This was made possible only because religion and political power were not separated from each other. Thus it seemed that with the separation of the two domains, in other words, with the creation of the modern secular state this problem was solved once and for all, at least in Europe. The actual result, however, was quite different. As Cavanaugh has brilliantly demonstrated:

The gradual transferal of loyalty from international church to national state was not the end of martyrdom in Europe but the shift to a new kind of martyrdom: dying for one's country—and, we must add, killing for one's country.<sup>8</sup>

What we have is not the solution to violence through its secularization but a “migration of the holy” from church to state, and thereby the creation of a new kind of martyrdom.<sup>9</sup>

Those who say that nationalism is the modern religion ... are not far off the mark. It would be foolish to expect that, once the state had claimed the holy, it would dispense with the power of it. If that were the case, we could expect that martyrdom would have faded from human history, at least in the West.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Cavanaugh, “Destroying the Church to Save it,” 126.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 144.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 149.

In a national state people are expected to sacrifice themselves for their country (just as Christians were expected to die for Christ), and indeed they gladly do so, because in this way their death, offered for the well-being of the nation will not be in vain. As Halbertal states: “Humans never created a greater altar to Molech than the centralized state. The modern state’s hunger for human sacrifice is insatiable.”<sup>11</sup>

To this there is not much more to add, save two closing remarks:

1. Throughout this book we have asked ourselves: what happens if the sacrifice leaves the domain of cult; can it still remain a sacrifice? In fact, the question itself was not put in the right way: the sacrifice does not leave the domain of cult, instead this latter has to be transferred. Just as Jesus’ death, a “simple” secular execution, was interpreted as a ritualistic event of cosmic importance, so the death of soldiers dying for the political and financial interests of some leading groups could be understood as a holy sacrifice for God and the homeland.
2. This “migration of holiness” and the emergence of a new kind of martyrdom was possible because of a very deep-rooted need for martyrs and the urge to sacrifice oneself for some “holy” cause.

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<sup>11</sup> Halbertal, *On Sacrifice*, 105.



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What is the meaning of the martyr's sacrifice? Is it true that the martyr imitates Christ? After the "one and eternal" sacrifice of Jesus why are from time to time new (and often quite numerous) sacrifices necessary? What is the underlying concept concerning the divinity? How do these ideas survive in present times?

These are the kind of questions behind the inquiries in this monograph. The author investigates martyrdom as a (voluntary) human sacrifice and wishes to demonstrate how human sacrifice has been turned into martyrdom. The two emblematic figures of this transformation are Iphigeneia and Isaac. Pesthy argues that all the peoples in the environment in which Christianity came into being are characterized by a very ambiguous and hypocritical attitude toward human sacrifice: while in theory they condemn it as barbarian and belonging to bygone times, in concrete cases they accept, admire and practice it. The same attitude survives in Christianity in which martyrs replace the human sacrifice of olden days: they are real sacrifices, not symbolical ones.

Our feelings about martyrs can be very different: we may admire their unbending courage and heroism or be irritated by their stubbornness, or even feel disgusted at the fanaticism with which they strove for death. But whatever our feelings may be, we must admit that a very strong motivation is needed to accept voluntarily or even seek death (and, in the majority of cases, a very painful death at that).

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